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A TRIBUTE TO NEIL VAIL ON HIS RETIREMENT AS MEMBERSHIP CHAIR

Founding fathers of organizations remain forever loyal by committing countless hours and effort beyond the call of duty to the success of their cause. One of our founding fathers is no exception. Neil Vail became a part of Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English at a time when the organization was experiencing some fiscal problems, but because Neil has vision, he could see the value of bringing the council to a firm footing for the benefit of all the English teachers in the state of Wisconsin for many years to come.

Neil served the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English as a district director when he would meet after school with groups of teachers and talk about English education. Neil would start the coffee pot and bring the treat. The real treat for the evening, however, was for those who chose to participate and interact with Neil. For years later Neil's name was seen on many convention programs sharing his knowledge and experiences with varied audiences. Neil Vail joins those few who can be considered gurus of English education in this state.

Neil then went on to serve the council for many years as its membership chair. This responsibility has been, without question, one of those in the council that goes unrecognized until the person decides that someone must succeed him. This is Neil's last year as membership chair for WCETE and I know you all want to join me in saying, "Thank you!" to him. Neil has made sure that your membership has been active and that you were receiving the publications. He was very prompt in sending renewal notices to all of us. He also provided mailing labels for all the district directors upon demand. Neil was most proud to give his report to the Executive Board of WCETE when the membership had grown; when it was down, Neil encouraged others to get out there and spread the word about the benefits of joining. Someone will learn the task, but the history Neil brings to the position can never be replaced.

To me, Neil is a mentor and a good friend. He became a good friend as a result of the opportunities he shared with me at local, state, and national conventions. Neil enjoyed letting a rookie tag along and learn as much as he could from a 'master.' The 'master' was a good teacher by providing varied experiences to help me grow professionally. As friends, we have grown together.

Neil, in your retirement you will not spend any less time thinking about Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English; you will, however, be spreading those thoughts to every facet of the council and not just membership. From the council I wish you and Elida all the happiness that I have in my heart. The council loves you!

Is Neil Vail a founding father or a father who found an organization and committed himself to the cause of spreading the value of English education throughout this state and beyond? I ask you to answer the question.

With sincerity,

Robert Skafie
INDEPENDENT PLAY READING: AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE SEMESTER EXAM

Mary Jo Wojtusik

In the happy era of student-centered/meaning-centered approaches to teaching literature, I am continually searching for new methods of evaluation. In our school we have the option of handling the semester exam through some type of presentation, but I had never done that before. I decided to try the idea in Dramatic Lit: the class was intrigued by the notion of not having to cram their minds with facts to be memorized. To the extent that students become immersed in a piece of literature with a language-experience approach, I am convinced that they take ownership of it. Among the benefits of role play, along with listening and writing, Moffett and Wagner list the following advantages:

1. promotes expression of all types
2. improves concentration and energy focus
3. forges itself into a learning method for other purposes as well
4. makes school experiences with language "fun and meaningful"
5. facilitates collaboration in small groups
6. exercises and channels emotions (118).

My objectives included students' independent reading of a full-length play, completing some critical analysis, preparing a written document on their studies, and finally presenting to the class. The project was built into a three-week time frame.

Having prepared a handout of guidelines, I explained my expectations. Working alone or in pairs, students were to read a suitable play based on my recommendations and prepare a written, verbal, and visual interpretation of that play. The written response included seven areas about which they were to comment in at least one well-developed paragraph (for a total of seven). 1) About the playwright--relevant information 2) Literary Criticism 3) Brief plot summary 4) Dramatic Tradition (comedy, farce, dark comedy, tragedy, serious play) with reasons for the response 5) Themes--Which ones were being explored and how were they developed? 6) Dramatis Personae--List major characters, elaborating on whether or not they were sympathetic, convincing, or interesting. 7) Do a character sketch on either the protagonist or antagonist. (I also provided a handout on how to write the sketch.)

With regard to form, these were the instructions: 1) Papers that are typed or done on the computer will be given better grades--all else being equal. 2) Double-spacing is required--no title page. Directions for page one will be put on the board. 3) Grammar, mechanics, and neatness count.

The verbal response was comprised of 1) a five-minute book talk using suitable content from the written section and 2) a five-minute scene from the play. They were to select the best one for this purpose and present it with lots of expression. Memorizing lines is preferred but not required, and the use of make-up, costumes, and props is also optional.

Lastly, the visual response involved devising visual aids for the verbal presentation: character masks, dioramas, posters, and collages. My overall directions were "Have fun and learn something."

To begin with, I prepared a list of plays that I consider worthwhile though I encouraged students to think of additional titles that might work. As an aside, I also warned them about possibly offensive language in some of the contemporary selections. By the way, a few of my titles came from an article in English Journal "Dramas of the 80's." The selection answers the question: what plays deserve to be studied in junior or senior high classes?

Next, with list in hand, we made a visit to the public library to find play copies I didn't have in the classroom. After making their choices, students signed a sheet, also indicating whether they were working solo or in pairs. Concerned about individual accountability, I added the following provisions: 1) I required that each student submit a detailed
summary after reading the play during three class periods. Observing their use of time likewise helped me evaluate the total exam. 2) I asked those working in pairs to hand in a paragraph with their written responses outlining who did what. Therefore, I reinforced the notion of personal responsibility even though students only needed to hand in one written response per group.

Fairly soon, a day was spent in the library looking up author information and literary criticism. This activity required a review of MLA and a reminder about paraphrasing.

Of course, one must remain somewhat tolerant of noise and movement during the preparations. It helped that we had an empty cafeteria nearby for some pairs to rehearse. Incidentally, I told any student "going it alone" to ask another to read parts as needed. During prep time kids were given occasional passes to the art room to make visuals or props, such as a graduate's hat or a monkey's paw. A few students spent a day or two in the choir room recording musical accompaniment for their songs or in the costume area picking out hats, long skirts, and dresses. This flexibility works well here because I was able to monitor their whereabouts quite easily, but the situation might be different in another school.

Based on class size and grouping, I determined that we would require not only the 90-minute allotted time but also an additional period. The students drew names to see who would go first, second, and so on. What follows are a few highlights of the presentations. After a crisp introduction with an overview of the characters, Lea and Jenny enacted the scene where Amanda confronts her daughter about her pretense over attending business school. Paula and John did a wonderful rendition of the opening scene from On Golden Pond when Ethel and Norman first arrive. Jon donned an old fishing hat and vest to catch the illusive "Walter," while Paula carried in the wood. Both students successfully portrayed what they considered an important theme: "Love can last forever"—even among the loons. In a cutting from The Matchmaker, we peeked through the window into Irene Malloy's hat shop in New York as she and Minnie tried on various styles—to choose one that was really "provocative."

The young ladies who interpreted Steel Magnolias invited us into the beauty salon as Shelby announces that she's going to have a baby. With their hair in rollers and a truckload shipment of shampoo, mousse, and hair spray, they were well-equipped. Their intent was to picture southern women as the title suggests: soft on the outside; tough within. The Stage Manager from Our Town beckoned us into the drugstore as George and Emily reveal their true feelings to each other. For a visual aid, Michele and Jodi made a collage of "Significant Insignificants," which alluded to the theme of the play: to live each precious moment to the fullest. Among the symbols included were balloons from a first birthday party, socks to warm people's feet in the cold, and a small girl playing with her puppy in the snow.

As an afterthought after deciding to write the article, I made a small request of the classes to compose a paragraph telling me what they thought of this semester exam, compared to a traditional one—in terms of educational value. Here are a few responses.

"We felt that this project was appropriate for this class as a semester exam. Because it is a course in dramatic literature, it would only be right to end it with everything we learned. A regular exam would consist mostly of vocabulary which most of us forget after a week. But by acting out a scene from a play and doing some written analysis, one learns much more."

"This is better, I think, because all the other classes use tests, and when you do that, everything gets mumble-jumbled together, and you don't learn anything."

"Doing this sort of semester exam is much more interesting than a written test. After all, we have written tests in most of our others classes. Doing something different is great!"

There were no negative responses.

According to David W. and Sharon Arthur Moore in their article "Reading Literature Independently," our aim should be to develop independent readers. Such readers rely on themselves to decide what should be obtained from print as well as how to go about obtaining it; they respond appropriately to new reading
situations. The benefits of independence are summarized in this adage: "Give me a fish and I eat for a day; teach me to fish, and I eat for a lifetime" (n. p.). I will leave it at that.

Works Cited


Mary Jo Wojtusik teaches English at Merrill High School

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Executive Board of the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English appointed Tim Hirsch and Rhoda Maxwell as co-editors of the Wisconsin English Journal for a three-year term. The address for both is:

Wisconsin English Journal
Rhoda Maxwell/Tim Hirsch, Co-Editors
English Department
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
Eau Claire, WI 54702
TO THE ZOO (AN ENGLISH 9 AUTOBIOGRAPHY)

Gary Jones

"Children, we have something very important to tell you," He said, as three year old Josh and eight year old Jennifer Sat side by side on the sofa, silently.

"And you must remember that above all else, We love you very, very much," She said, to Josh, wormy-squirmly, and Jennifer, a portrait in stone.

A square glass-topped coffee table separated the children And their parents who sat symmetrically across from them On matching occasional chairs in off-white.

"Mother and I are not going to be living together," He said, staring at the cactus Which guarded the glass table.

"You children will live here with me, But you'll still get to see Daddy each week," She said, leaning forward to nudge a crystal bowl off center.

"I'll be moving into a really neat apartment, And you can visit me every Sunday, And we'll have great fun," he said. She said,

"And we'll all be very, very happy!" Josh smiled, because Mommy and Daddy were both smiling, Thin, shiny-eyed family photo smiles.

"I want to go to the zoo," Jennifer said, Choking on pebbled sobs, fanning embered tears with her fists.

"I want to go to the zoo, now!"

And they did, Dismaying flutters of pigeons as they ate popcorn, Feeding cautious handfuls of shelled corn to the goats, Fantasizing scary lunches for a caged pride of disdainful lions,

Delaying the moment When Daddy fed his suitcase to the BMW And drove out of their lives.

TRADING LIMITS FOR POSSIBILITIES

Dawn Perkins

I never got any help last year in English and I never said anything. I was just there. I never read anything and I faked the reports. I did enough to pass. Last year, (when my writing) was bad, I just kept on going. It didn't matter to me. This year I try to make it perfect and that's where the frustration now comes from.

Dominic

He got a "C" on a report because he didn't put the title in the right place. The teacher didn't even talk to him about it. He tore it up and put it in the wastebasket. Then he started a quiet rebellion.

Dominic's Mother

Dominic's choosing to engage in a "quiet rebellion" is not unusual. Students like Dominic who are tracked in low-level English courses do not find writing engaging or meaningful. Many of these students feel like failures in the use of their own language because many skills-based English courses focus on error detection and remediation. The act of writing is taught as disconnected skills, as purposeless to communicating about anything meaningful. So Dominic and others like him choose to fail by creating disturbances in the classroom or by simply "going through the motions," meeting the minimal expectations of the teacher and the low standards of their sills-based curriculum. In the case of Dominic, he chose to be "just average" at the expense of growing as a writer.

Most well-meaning English teachers believe they are helping their students become better writers by using a deficit language model and a skills-based approach (see Farr and Daniels for an argument regarding tracking of low social economic status students; see Nystrand and Gamoran regarding classroom discourse and achievement in basic high school English courses; see Shaughnessy for her commentary on the consequences of skill-based writing instruction). Most teachers believe that if students learn to write correctly, they will become competent writers.
What is missing in this approach is a meaningful context for writing instruction. The concept of meaningfulness cannot be taken for granted in composition instruction. When researchers at the Institute for Research on Teaching set out to address the question of why students do not write, they discovered that the problem had to do with the meaningfulness of school writing tasks (Florio 55). Creating opportunities for students to generate their own purposes for school writing can motivate student writers. Research points to the powerful motivational potential of writing which is designed to share a student-constructed purpose (Mayher, Lester, and Pradl; Hilllocks 54; Stallard; Sawkins). A writing workshop context for writing instruction is one way teachers can create opportunities for basic writers to write pieces of meaning to them.

When working with Dominic in a ninth grade composition course designed for basic writers, I discovered that teaching writing in a workshop context best met the needs of these writers. In a classroom where teacher and peers worked to support the student writer, writing instruction became "real" and "exciting" as Dominic himself once put it.

AN INTRODUCTION TO DOMINIC:

Dominic was placed in my basic ninth-grade English course because of low grades in his eighth-grade English course. He spent the first few days in my classroom daydreaming and sleeping with his head on his desk, unable to concentrate on any task for more than ten to fifteen minutes. When he became frustrated, he did not ask for help; he simply would stare out into space. When we had extended reading or writing lessons, he did not participate. I began to wonder that his language skills might be so underdeveloped that he felt overwhelmed by the reading and writing tasks presented in class and did not feel he could participate. I asked the reading specialist to assess his skills with an informal test of reading ability. She discovered that his reading level was between sixth and seventh grade. At this point, I understood that Dominic's problem with reading was not lack of ability. Many of his fellow classmates scored at this reading level or below. I began to think that his problem had more to do with a lack of motivation than a lack of ability or skill. This conclusion was further substantiated when I surveyed Dominic's eighth-grade teachers regarding his performance and attitudes toward learning. His eighth-grade English teacher claimed, "Dominic had difficulty with both reading and writing, but excelled in drama and had no difficulty reading scripts." His eighth grade science teacher summed up Dominic's ability as a student: "His problems are motivational. He could do the work when and if he wanted to."

Dominic is representative of students who responded favorably to a workshop approach to writing instruction. Within the workshop context, Dominic became motivated to write because he was allowed the freedom to find his own reason to write. It was my job to create a classroom environment where this search for personal meaning in school writing tasks could happen.

DOMINIC AND THE WRITING WORKSHOP:

Dominic and the other students in this class had been taught that English class and writing in school had to do with filling out worksheets and writing short essay responses on tests. They had never been asked to do much extended writing. Likewise, they were inexperienced with finding ideas to write about since most of the writing they had done previously was in response to teacher-generated topics designed to test skill acquisition. I needed to start my instruction by establishing that they would control the purpose and the content of their writing.

I introduced the writing workshop approach by conducting freewriting exercises and other forms of journal writing exercises in preparation for the first writing project. These writing exercises were usually timed to demonstrate that writers can always find something to write about if they can free themselves from their inhibitions about writing. Dominic was fascinated by these exercises. He was surprised that he could write so fluently. On one exercise designed to record memories
for a possible narrative, Dominic offered to share his stream of memories. He had much to say, especially about a friend, Al. After Dominic read his freewriting aloud to the class, I followed with my own memory of orchestrating a plan to throw thirty dictionaries out of a classroom window while my English teacher slept at his desk. Although my memory was less well-developed than Dominic's, it demonstrated that I, too, was a struggling writer. Dominic and the other students laughed aloud at my escapade. A writing community was beginning to form.

In the second week, the students and I drafted memory narratives based in part on the freewriting exercises of the week before. I assigned Dominic and the other students the task of creating a "finished piece of writing." As the project started to unfold, the students requested more specific instructions concerning length and form. I avoided setting these criteria and instead used a piece a former student had written as an example of how to move a piece from the prewriting stage to the drafting stage.

During this demonstration, Dominic shared his surprise in finding that I had saved the writings of my former students. I used this opportunity to explain to the class that their writing should be written with an audience of their peers in mind because it would be shared in some way with other students. Dominic suddenly became more interested in how to go about writing his narrative about Al. He sought help from his peers during class and came to my classroom after school for additional help.

We then shared drafts in peer-editing situations. The students were asked to share their drafts by reading them aloud to a partner. I avoided using checklists or worksheets to guide the process. I wanted these writers to experience problem solving and learn to work together. Instead of giving specific instructions, I prefaced the activity by encouraging them to talk to each other about the writing rather than write comments. To facilitate "writing talk," I modeled the kind of conversation I was looking for by sharing a draft of a piece I was working on about a childhood experience with my alcoholic father. We discussed what was effective about the piece and shared helpful ideas for revision.

I also used an overhead to show writing done by a former student. The piece was competent writing in terms of content and organization, but was riddled with mechanical errors. When I asked the students to comment on the quality of the piece, Dominic began by criticizing the spelling and punctuation errors. I then asked the class to comment on the author's message and technique. Dominic was able to find some things positive to say about the writer's use of description and sentence structure to build suspense. I explained that it is relatively easy to correct a piece of writing and far more difficult to help a peer improve the ideas, description or organization of a piece.

Following this discussion, Dominic met with a fellow student to peer edit. Dominic approached this activity with trepidation. He felt uncomfortable taking responsibility for helping another student with his writing and was constantly asking for my feedback to be sure he was doing things "right." I told him that there was no way he could do it "wrong" if he was responding as an interested reader.

Later, I met with each peer-editing pair and held one-on-one conferences. These writing conferences focused on helping the writers with whatever problems they identified in their work. Dominic and I met often in such conferences during the initial stages of his writing projects. He said he needed feedback to "find out what I was trying to say."

In the conference concerning Dominic's characterization of Al, Dominic discovered that he was giving his peer editor and me a faulty description of Al. Dominic, through his selective choice of detail, had led the reader to believe Al was a happy, carefree person. During the conference, Dominic informed us that Al was recently hospitalized for drug abuse. Dominic realized through having readers react to his writing that he needed to add some additional information in order for the piece to say what he intended.
Dominic's piece on Al became his favorite of the semester. "I was writing about a friend. All those memories...It was just him right there and what we did." He was especially surprised and delighted when I chose his piece to share with the entire class. He read it aloud and told about how the idea came to be, the difficult decisions he had to make as he wrote it, and his favorite parts of the piece. He then responded to questions and comments from his peers.

In a later interview, Dominic said that sharing his writing and listening to others share their work was a turning point for him as a writer. He started to care about his writing.

"Worksheets are easy. Half the time I forget I have them to do and don't do them. My writing needs to make sense in this class because we talk about it as a class. I don't forget about these writing assignments because I think about them after I leave the class." Writing had become a communication act for Dominic. Writing on topics of importance to him and sharing them with an audience of his peers gave meaning to the writing task.

Dominic's piece on Al was published in a class book titled *Inside of Fresh Minds*, named and illustrated by Dominic. The publication was distributed to other freshmen classes and to parents. When another student commented that he wasn't pleased with the piece he had authored for the magazine, Dominic responded, "How could you not like your own writing? That's like not liking a part of yourself."

**DOMINIC AND SCHOOL:**

While tasting success in my English class, Dominic began to flourish in his social studies course. The reports from his social studies teacher indicated that his concentration and effort had significantly increased over the semester. His teacher had the following to say about his work early in the semester:

Avoidance would be a good description of Dominic's attitude towards learning and work in general. Quarter one assignments missed were applications of book material in a lab or experiment write up. This involves using knowledge from book and class. Questions out of the book were done at an average level, but again any supplemental exercises, at a higher difficulty, late and of poor quality.

Later in the semester, Dominic's attitude toward school work seemed to change his teacher's perception of him as a student. His social studies teacher made the following comments late in the semester. These comments represent a positive change in Dominic as a student.

Dominic's attitude seems to have improved dramatically--most evident in the completion of work and turning it in on time. Most obvious is the effort that is now evident in his work and in class activities, whereas before it was neglect, tuning out and or disinterest. He has improved from nothing to producing something of value in most cases.

While there is no direct evidence to indicate that Dominic's improvement in social studies can be linked to his work in English class, Dominic's school work in his other classes did improve as the semester progressed. It is as if he gained confidence about himself in the role of student. In some way his work as a writer and participant in the writing workshop seemed to contribute to his new attitude toward school. Dominic said in an interview late in the semester, "I don't need to escape into my world as much." The writing workshop approach seemed to provide a way for Dominic to enter the world of school.

**IMPORTANCE OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP APPROACH:**

The writing workshop approach to writing instruction is especially valuable to basic writers at high school level because it improves their self-images as writers and as students. The following is a list of components of the writing workshop method which are especially important for meeting the needs of the basic writer:

1. **Writing Practice:** Basic writers are given many opportunities to write whole pieces of discourse. Writing is not taught in bits and pieces through isolated skill-based exercises, but as meaningful forms of communication.
2. **Modeling:** Modeling the process of writing provides the teacher with an opportunity to articulate the decision-making processes inherent in the composing process. With basic writers, it is important to share risk-taking during the modeling exercises. Teachers must feel free to share parts of personal self in order for students to trust that they can too.

3. **Audience:** Many basic writers at the high school level lack respect for school and teachers because they have been treated as failures and misfits by the school system. This anger prevents them from being interested in responding to a teacher audience. With a peer audience, the student writer is on somewhat more "equal footing" and can feel free to discuss the problems in his writing. A key concept for teaching basic writers, who have been disempowered in schools, is to allow them the autonomy to control the purpose and content of their writings.

4. **Support:** Since many of these techniques and skills are new for basic writers, a great deal of procedural, strategical, and emotional support needs to be given at every stage of teaching. Students cannot be expected to embrace this approach initially since it is so foreign to their experience as school writers.

5. **Skills:** Rather than simply "red-lining" errors and sending students back to their desks to correct their work, editing conferences require students to tell how and why they made certain editing decisions, working at correcting logic while searching for logical patterns in their mechanical errors. Students analyze and attend to their own grammatical, spelling and punctuation problems as part of their role as writers.

6. **Students Treated as Authors:** When students write for many audiences and publish their work, they need to attend to spelling, punctuation, and form issues to a degree that classroom writing exercises do not require. The writing folders my students kept in class contained all drafts of their writing pieces and these were shared with parents on occasion. I used student writings from previous classes as models of various assignments so the students realized that their writings had value over time. I also used their writings as models for my other average and above average ninth grade English classes to show that their writing was not "below standard." Most importantly, I paused at the end of each writing project to share and celebrate their work as respected authors.

7. **Individualized Instruction:** The writing workshop approach builds an atmosphere of trust and support for each individual student through the one-on-one conference, drafting in class, and peer response. Because each basic writer comes to the writing experience with different needs and experiences with language, the flexibility of the workshop model provides the teacher with the opportunity to know each student as a writer and accommodate instruction accordingly.

**CONCLUSION:**

In the writing process research of the last decade very little has been written about the validity of using a writing workshop approach with high school basic writers. While writing process researchers have focused on the overall benefits to all young writers of using workshop methods to teach writing, it is difficult to find research which elaborates on the special benefits this approach has for high school writers in basic writing courses. In studying Dominic and my other students, I discovered the tremendous potential this approach has for motivating students who are usually "turned off" of school and "tuned out" of learning through school writing experiences.

With basic writers, as with all student writers, the proper stage must be set for growth to occur. Good writing instruction is a simple transaction requiring someone with something to say (the student writer), someone who wants to listen (an audience), and a place that they share (the classroom). And in this place they exchange what they brought with them—the human need to
communicate. They listen and hear each other and writers grow. A writer responds to the needs of a reader, and, likewise, readers respond to writers; in this is the writing experience. Yet, it is just this experience which is denied most high school basic writers. Instead of viewing writing as an active, enticing experience shared with others, these young writers are most often exposed to writing as a test or as a series of worksheet exercises.

In Dominic's story, I offer an alternative to the traditional skills-based approach with basic high school writers. A writing workshop can work with these writers; it is imperative that a student-centered classroom community be the foundation of writing instruction if these special writers are to become skilled and confident authors.

Dawn Perkins is a Doctoral Student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and was formerly an English Teacher at Middleton High School.

Works Cited


18 JAN 91

Dennis Crowe

Wherein to wander tonite? There seems to be a lot broken, though not lying around, the flopping dynamics of the headless. Fatigue seeping in at the corners where usually a moment like this lies so full of concentration, similar of dance. Maybe the lifting of song in ears will suspend or counterbeam the weight.

None of us are quite the same since the last few days have taken hope and shaken it by the throat ripped and bent some dreams; some who can't afford to lose what dreams they've got, and like some wheel grinding on bearings gone soft and avry from the uneven load, the burden of the poor, being fragmented again by the sharp edge scythe. We are made tired by 'the disease of conceit' and have no chance but to find some center wherever we are.

What threshold of centering is needed? How many now shifted can find a return or new axis of spin, before the dozer blade erodes all sign of the past, connections to what we were and maybe must be? We utter the talk of observation, knowing now more than ever that we are a part of it all, and even the worst is a part we must carry. I am every nosecone.

I see the fire is being fed by what I must share. Tough old blind women living alone may escape the daily swim in a troubled world, sanctuary in the tension zone between the now and when, it's no consolation for us being pulled so tightly against the eccentric wheel.
I see the fire
burns on ember but heats the stone,
heat without loss or flame, heat within
the well laid hearth.
What forge is in these words?
Upon what anvil does the hammer resonate
to shape a response, to stand with feet
in the tide where foam, water, and sand
cycle the past into what the future will find?

The wind of these times
must breathe upon the coals
to spread the warmth and kindle
what we all recall and must fine.
We must dig in the washing flow of the moon's pull
We must transect the lines of our crossing,
breach the walls of our own resistance,
scale the walls of our own confusion,
brighten the footing for future foundations
in earth turned under.

I am every nosecone,
every gram of suffering,
every twist of fortune turned aside
by conceit, greed, and fear.
In this shell connecting us all lies the spawn of hope and necessity,
an end of childhood for the aged
and uncrowned children of the planet,
for the careful planning of the complacent.

The cables of ocean and heaven pass the call.
I am there, here, everywhere,
seeking the angle of spin
to converge upon the hub of our attention,
the heart, core, axis, spoken and rim
of the heated furnace,
the forge of our understanding.

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TOWARDS A FEMINIST PEDAGOGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION
Angela Scanzello

With the recognition of increased numbers of adult women students in college classrooms today comes the obligation to understand them better as a cohort of readers and writers. Whether reluctant or animated participants, most of these non-traditional students enrich class discussions by calling upon the varied resources of their life experiences. This paper, in effect, calls upon us as teachers to listen intently to their voices, and to explore how the teaching of literature and composition may be connected in ways that are relevant to them. My assumptions are twofold: that language (and thus meaning) is socially constructed and that adult women students constitute a community of writers, interpreters, and learners. One recent study of female development is intended to help us understand adult women as "knowers."

In Women's Ways of Knowing, Belenky (1986) and her associates point out that little attention has been paid to the modes of thinking, valuing, and knowing preferred and developed by women. To understand better how family and educational histories produce certain proclivities for learning and knowing, they conducted 135 interviews over a period of five years with women regardless of their backgrounds and ages. The result of their research was the specification of five categories describing the ways women experience knowing:

1) silence, a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority; 2) received knowledge, a perspective from which women conceived of themselves as capable or receiving, even reproducing knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own; 3) subjective knowledge, a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited; 4) procedural knowledge, a position in which women are invested in learning and apply objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge; and 5) constructed
knowledge, a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing (15).

However, Belenky and her co-researchers acknowledge that these categories are abstractions which may help us understand women better, but which cannot replicate the uniqueness of each woman's intellectual life.

Eminently concerned with the intellectual life of women are feminist critics. Although they may disagree on many different issues, most agree that gender both complicates and informs the reading and writing of texts. Adrienne Rich (1979), recognizing women's propensity for collaborative learning, advocates more teaching in the style of community, and the elimination of classes in the "masculine adversary style of discourse" which has dominated universities for centuries (138). In another essay, she quotes Wittgenstein: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world," and suggest an application for a feminine epistemology: "listening and watching in art and literature, in the social sciences, in all the descriptions we are given of the world, for the silences, the absences, the nameless, the unspoken, the encoded—for there we will find the true knowledge of women" (1979, 245).

Jacobs (1979) addressing the question of a "special language for women" in literary discourse, argues instead for a "difference of view." Women writers should not separate themselves from masculine discourse but work from within to deconstruct it. Their different perspectives are not the result of biology, but are "constituted by heterogeneity which is that of textuality itself" (13). Showalter (1979, 1985) goes a step further and proposes a "feminist poetics" in which she separates woman as reader ("feminist critique") from woman as writer or producer of texts ("gynocritique"). A "feminist critique" endeavors to change our understandings of a text by uncovering its ideological underpinnings; thus it is essentially political and polemical. "Gynocritics," on the other hand, is comparable to critical ethnography in its focus on what women have said, experienced, and felt, that is, in its effort to document and thereby authenticate female perspectives and voices.

Because women tell us that they thrive in a "connected classroom," i.e., one in which they interact freely and involve themselves with others, and one in which listening, trusting, accepting, and believing are preferred to doubting and disputation, the ideas and the practices of Peter Elbow are especially suitable to the teaching of women. Elbow's "The Doubting and Believing Game" (1973) empowers students to construct two sides to an argument and encourages them to respond openly to each other in peer groups. Elbow asks students to describe the text and to tell what they see and understand. He also insists that they get actively involved by trying to believe the reader and by experiencing the writing as the writer did. (These are, by the way, the basic skills that the ethnographer fine tunes.) However, Elbow notes that criticizing and doubting are the more frequent modes of response. Later he comments: "We tend to assume that the ability to criticize a claim we disagree with counts as more serious intellectual work than the ability to enter into it and temporarily assent" (1986, 258). Whether it is the academic or the freshman who is arguing, this proclivity makes it exceedingly difficult to hear a voice different from one's own, to receive new information, or to understand a position one disagrees with. Elbow also comments on the "fighting" metaphor of argumentation such as "poking holes, advancing points, and insisting that an argument "stand up" (266). Doubting, moreover, is the cognitive basis for arguing and is associated with the masculine behaviors of asserting, interrupting, and competing. Believing, by contrast, is the "rhetoric of experience." It invites the making of images, metaphors and narratives. Nevertheless, Doubting, the "rhetoric of propositions" is essential to the process wherein people who begin a discussion with opposing views frequently end up in agreement. This epistemological process, according to Elbow, starts with believing all propositions presented, leaves critical judgement in abeyance and is resolved by both systematic "Believing and Doubting" (263-68).
Another writing teacher who has successfully translated her phenomenological theories into practice is Ann Berthoff (1981, 1982). Berthoff exhorts teachers to ground themselves solidly in philosophical perspectives which facilitate the teaching of writing and to build upon their students' natural ways of knowing. Like Elbow she views writing as a dialectical process wherein students enhance their innate language capacities in a supportive, dynamically interactive environment. Echoing Paulo Freire (1980), she asks writing teachers to begin where their students are. By doing so, they begin with them as "meaning makers." A teacher who builds upon the generative knowledge of her students understands that the names they use, the images they see, and the metaphors they make, collectively raise their consciousness of themselves as knowers.

Addressing the needs of the oppressed peasants of Brazil and Chile, Freire (1970, 1982) developed literacy programs based on the principle that language is both constructed by its users and employed by them to understand themselves as well as their positions in their world, a focus that is also crucial to a feminist pedagogy of the English classroom. He argues further that true communication can only occur when readers and writers exist as social and political equals. Unfortunately, in too many classrooms, the conditions for genuine dialogue are suppressed or strictly controlled. When adult women are not presented with the opportunities for meaningful dialogue, they become passive receptors of information described by Belenky et al (1986).

The discourse theories of Britton (1975) and Kinneavy (1971) assume active dialogue and the interactions of contexts, writers and writing. They are, as a result, useful and relevant to adult women writers. Both Britton and Kinneavy underscore the importance of expressive discourse, and in doing so, reiterate themes culled from feminism and research on female development. Britton argues that the expressive function of language is closest to the self and the source of all verbal thinking. Insofar as the transactional and the poetic functions grow out the initial and essential explorations of the expressive, the entire writing process is always involved with discovery. Language functions, moreover, change in response to the roles of writers and their purposes for writing. Writers as "participants or as spectators," that is, writers engaging their public or private voices, first discover the self and then come to terms with the exigencies of writing for different audiences. Likewise, Kinneavy's theory of expressive discourse emanates from a phenomenological base. For Kinneavy expression is not unrestrained emotionalism, or rampant self-indulgence, but the fundamental process through which an individual using writing for a specific purpose develops an authentic voice and grows in self-definition. It is this focus that is essential to a feminist pedagogy. It is this focus that is consonant with the basic tenets of Reader Response Criticism.

Although Reader Response Criticism is not a cohesive system of literary inquiry, it can be described as a movement unified by a belief in the integrity of an individual's response to the meaning of a text and singularly opposed to the hegemony of the New Criticism. Bleich (1976), the most subjective representative of the group, proposes a psychological model wherein meaning is determined totally by an individual emotional reaction to a literary reading. His major objective is to evoke a reader's awareness of his or her individual identity. But he insists that after the initial emotional arousal, students want to move on to what the text means. They consequently begin a process of recreating meaning by personal associations and by searching for explanations of the words in front of them. In the classroom this process is mediated by the teacher and what is agreed upon by the majority as a valid interpretation. This approach is not only promising for those who are novices to literary interpretation but also to women who are groping for ways to articulate responses, to voice tenuous beliefs, and to assert fragile self-images. To the extent that they share a belief in the construction of meaning by readers and writers and define both reading and writing as acts of composing texts, Elbow,
Berthoff, and Bleich form a compatible teaching team, a team that sensitively negotiates the burgeoning texts of all our students.

Mailloux (1982) also looks at the shared paradigms of rhetoric and criticism and believes that a rapprochement is inevitable. Similarly, he views Reader Response theories as the present catalyst, particularly the work of Stanley Fish. In "Is There a Text in This Class?" Fish answers those who fear the Academy will crumble under the debilitating effects of subjective criticism and his own relativism. He writes,

Sentences emerge only in situations and within those situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible, although within another situation that same utterance, no longer the same, will have another normative meaning that will be no less obvious and accessible (308).

As a consequence, "an infinite plurality of meaning is not possible." Meanings in this way become products of situations and "to be in a situation is to see words... as already meaningful" (309). Thus Fish imbues readers with the authority of their own community, and readers, in turn, bring to the interpretation of texts a collective assumption of what is important to them and what should be attended to by them.

Like Bleich and Fish, Louise Rosenblatt (1933, 1976, 1978) invests readers with interpretive integrity; like Elbow and Berthoff she is concerned with translating theory into practice. However, she defines reading as an "event" in the life of the reader who "recreates meaning from a text" and develops an "aesthetic" and, or "esthetic" stance toward what she calls "the lived-through experience" (1978). Her "esthetic" response closely resembles Britton's "poetic" function. What readers do with a text and how they experience it depends on their perceived purposes for reading. Although Rosenblatt also rejects the "closed system" of the New Critics, she advocates close attention to a student's unique response to a text and criticizes the"excesses of a totally subjective response approach. The most important aspect of her work for positing a feminist pedagogy is her attention to the "environment" of reading and her belief in the integrity of an affective "transaction" or reading. "Just as the personality and concerns of the reader are largely socially patterned, so the literary work, like language itself is a social product. The genesis of literary techniques occurs in a social matrix" (1938, 1976, 28). Rosenblatt also acknowledges the strong social and cultural underpinnings of her transactional model by supporting ethnographic methods for research in language and literature (1986).

In sum, the interdisciplinary literature reviewed briefly in this paper was selected on the basis of its congruence with what research in female development and reentry women are telling us about how adult women learn. This combined research points to the appropriateness of practices derived from reader-response criticism and from the experience and expressive-based rhetorics of Elbow, Berthoff, Britton and Kinneavy. In effect, it points to the teaching of composition and literature in ways that are significant to women and in ways that signify women.

Works Cited


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Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English

Spring, 1991

TO: Readers of the Wisconsin English Journal

FROM: Rhoda Maxwell
       Editor

RE: The Wisconsin English Journal: Your Suggestions

During the editing, typing, layout, and printing of a new issue of the Journal, I become intimately familiar with it. By the time it finally has your name and address on it, and it's carted off to the mail room, I feel a little like a parent sending a child off to college. In the development stages, I have come to know the Journal well, but I don't really know what happens to it when it reaches your hands.

When Tim Hirsch agreed to share the editing responsibilities with me, he asked me a few questions I wasn't readily able to answer: Who reads the Journal? Which articles do they read? Which ones do they like the best? Which articles have been big flops with Journal audiences? To answer these questions (and others) with more precision, Tim and I decided to ask for your help.

Please complete the enclosed questionnaire and put it in the mail. The return postage is prepaid. With your input, the Journal can reflect your thoughts and ideas.

Thank you.

Rhoda

Rhoda

jrk
PSYCHOSOMATIC ILLNESS
Alvin Menninga

They write these days
About dangers to health
In the work environment
And have set up a bureau
To oversee them:
Machines that maim and mangle,
Chemicals that cause cancer,
And caustic particulate contaminants.
Teaching too is a hazardous occupation.
The health of a teacher
Is under constant pressure.
In no other job
Are there so many active minds
Concurring every working day,
Hoping you are sick.

Alvin Menninga, University of Wisconsin-Platteville

THE PARANOID NATURALIST LOOKS AT TREES
Ralph Schneider

The trees are afraid to move.
Their desperate secrets are held tight
By deep roots, knuckled hard
Around rocks, anchored in fissures.

Only from spring's wet grains
Bud out green hints aloft,
Tracing furtive and shifting silhouettes
Then shamed, they brown and fall.

Yes, the trees are afraid to move.
If they did, we'd know.
I'll watch them
For us all.

Trust me.

Ralph Schneider, English Department, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
This poem originally appeared in Upriver 4, Upriver Press.

THE BLOW OF THE AX LIES CURLED IN THE ACORN:
A TECHNIQUE FOR TEACHING THE WRITING OF POETRY
Tom Hansen

During a poetry reading at South Dakota State University, Robert Bly quoted a line that he attributed to Donald Hall: "The blow of the ax lies curled in the acorn." When I wrote Hall for permission to use that line as the title for this article, he replied immediately in a short, friendly note granting permission, pointing out that the line is slightly misquoted. It should be "resides," not "lies curled," adding, "I hate 'lies curled.'"

I, however, like "lies curled." So with all due respect to Donald Hall for writing that line but also to Robert Bly for misquoting it, I have retained the misquoted version.

"Resides" or "lies curled," Hall's line seems to vibrate with inevitability. What it must and will come to be--its life and death, and therefore the meaning of its existence--is buried within it beyond all choosing or changing. So, too, there is a kind of poetry or a way of writing poetry that lies, in some sense, beyond the conscious, willful choosing of the poet. It occurs when the ordering, manipulating, I-centered intellect is kept in check so that the inner inevitability of things, the intuitive sense of rightness, is allowed to slowly unfold. The origin of this sense of inevitability appears to be located somewhere in the right hemisphere of the brain.

Over the past eight years, I have slowly come to believe that beginning poetry-writing students need to be put into writing situations which force them to rely on right-brain thinking. I have been brought to this belief not by reading about creativity and brain research but by seeing students encounter four unexpected, temporarily insurmountable, and all-too-common "I" problems: "I have five lines about falling snow but can't think of anything else to say about it"; "I keep jumping from one thing to another until I have wandered completely away from the subject"; "I know what I feel, but I
can't get it down right on paper"; and "I can't think of anything
to write about." These "I" problems exist because of the false
assumptions that many of us still have about poetry.

Behind "I have five lines about falling snow but can't think
of anything else to say about it" is the assumption that a poet
has signed an unwritten contract obliging him or her to keep
writing about the subject that begins the poem. Since all five
lines are about falling snow, falling snow must be the subject of
the poem, and it would, therefore, be wrong to deliberately
abandon that subject—to step out of the falling snow and into,
for example, the dense wood of the trees it falls on or into the
dream of the burrowing animals who, fast asleep underground,
dream that it is snowing. This assumption that the initial
triggering subject of a poem is the final real subject is
discussed by Richard Hugo in the first two chapters of The
Triggering Town. As long as beginning poetry writers remain
faithful to their triggering subject, they are marooned beyond
rescue on a little five-line island covered with falling snow.

"I keep jumping from one thing to another until I have
wandered completely away from my subject" sounds like the cure to
the first "I" problem. In fact, both problems presuppose some
obligation not to abandon the given: that part of the poem that
comes quickly and easily. The earlier it comes in a poem, the
more it undermines beginning poets. Their gratitude toward it
will not allow them to turn their backs on it. Though they
wander away from their island of falling snow, they feel they
shouldn't. They constantly look for a path that will take them
back to the island. Thus, partially resisting the urge to
wander, they fail to see wandering as a sign that something else
is trying to get written--something that is not the falling snow
but that lies beneath the snow, hidden for now, but slowly rising
to the surface of consciousness. Only wandering from one
association to the next can beginning writers hope to stumble
over what is hidden in the snow. But allegiance to the given
holds them back. Their tentative wanderings take them nowhere.
They pay no attention to the opportunities that open in front of
them; they are too absorbed in looking over their shoulders at
the island that slowly recedes in the distance.

"I know what I feel, but I can't get it down right on paper"
assumes that a poem begins with a half-articulate feeling or
voiceless impulse and that the poem itself is the faithful
translation of this felt silence into words. Many poems do begin
with a sense of urgency only half understood. But the attempt to
translate that urgency directly into language and the belief that
a fairly exact verbal translation of it is possible—these
prevent one from ever "getting it right." But most students take
this feelings-into-words notion of poetry for granted. They are
surprised and disappointed to learn that working directly from
feelings to words often produces poetry that is emotional but
vague, almost without character, and dreadfully boring to
everyone except the person who wrote it; that a better way to
write poetry is to work from the words back toward the feeling;
that poems of emotion are recreations of feeling and not simple
recollections or direct translations of feeling; and that careful
attention to language (what you are saying) and not to emotion
(what you are feeling) is the key to everything. In poetry,
after all, language is what emotion is made of.

"I can't think of anything to write about" assumes that
thinking necessarily precedes writing, that all writing is a
record of what was in the writer's mind before he or she began to
put words on paper, and that writing therefore cannot occur
before and "I" has an idea. These assumptions are so commonplace
and derive so directly from common sense that any denial of them
seems to be willful perversity. But they are not necessarily
true—not, at least, in the writing of poetry. Although a
finished piece of writing, prose or poetry, is a record of what
the writer has thought, much first-draft writing is a tentative
groping in the dark. This kind of writing is itself a kind of
thinking. In prose, this creating stage leads one toward a
definable purpose. Then the shaping and completing stages
organize the prose piece to satisfy the requirements of this
purpose. But poetry is different. There are certain fleeting
states of mind and feeling, certain hunches and voiceless intuitions, which are common to all of us but which lie below conscious articulation. One discovers them not by directly thinking about them but by writing one's way into them. As the lady—quoted by E.M. Forster in Aspects of the Novel—said, "How can I tell what I think until I see what I say?"

The most common feature of these "I" problems is simply the presence of "I." A widely held notion in our culture is that poetry, more than any other kind of writing, is derived from a personal "I" and that the "I" is, one way or another, always present in poetry, even when the actual word "I" isn't. A sign of this concealed-but-present "I" in the work of beginning poetry-writing students is the presence of emotional editorializing. The reader is not merely shown a thing but is told how to feel about it or how the writer feels about it. Thus, tall trees are "stately," a child's eyes "shine brightly with wonder," the first rays of the morning sun "kiss" the tops of trees, and birds "sing joyously to the" rather abstract "world."

As an antidote to these "I" problems, and in an effort to counter the notion that "I" is central and necessary to poetry, I frequently put students into I-less writing situations, hedge them in with a few arbitrary rules, and tell them to write as rapidly as they can without making any critical judgments about their work while they are writing it. If class size permits, before each of these in-class writing periods ends, I give each student first read what he or she has written and then make at least one comment about anything that happened during the rapid-writing process. Sometimes I ask that this work be revised into a more finished poem, but often I don't. The purpose of this kind of writing is not to produce finished work. It is to externalize and objectivize an activity most students consider to be wholly internal and subjective.

The most random and arbitrary writing exercise I use is one I call Question/Answer. I begin by dividing a class into two groups—one to write the questions, the other to write the answers. I tell the Question Group, loud enough so the Answer Group can hear, to write fifteen questions. I suggest to them that the questions can be profound ("Is there a God?") or personal ("Will I ever be happy?") or trivial ("Hot enough for you today?"). I also suggest that they use a mixture of types but in no particular order. I insist that they work quietly enough so that no one in the Answer Group can hear them. Then I turn to the Answer Group and tell them, loud enough so the Question Group can hear, to write fifteen answers or statements. I suggest to them that the statements can be profound or mock-profound ("Life is like a deep well.") or personal ("No one likes me, because my ears are too big.") or trivial ("Twins meet Tigers in a twilight double header.") or anything else. I give the same concluding directions to them that I give to the Question Group.

I insist that both groups work quickly. When they are done, we move to the largest empty room in the building and—each group in opposite ends of the room—dim the lights or turn them out and use flashlights. From one end of the room, Question #1 is called out. Two or three seconds later, Answer #1 rings out in reply. I insist that the answerers not juggle the answers to make them in any way fit the questions. By the time we have heard all fifteen questions and answers, four things are obvious to all of us. First, some answers have so little relevance to the questions they follow that those particular combinations of question and answer are essentially meaningless. Second, some answers fit their questions so well (Q: "How are you today?
A: "Fine, thanks.") that they fail to touch the imagination. These first two situations indicate that a complete miss and a bulls-eye are of equally little value. What one is after, as in the following two situations, is a near miss—as if one's purpose were to strike the target as close to the edge as possible without completely missing it. Third, some answers are comically inappropriate or wildly inappropriate to the questions they follow. We laugh at these combinations, and a few students later—when there is more light in the room—write them down. I never find
out what, if anything, they do with these particular question-answer combinations, but I really don't care. The fact that they write them down pleases me. It shows that they can find intention and meaning in a writing activity designed to be intentionally meaningless.

Then there are the remaining two or three question-answer combinations. From a left-brain point of view, they belong to the first type mentioned above. But most of us there in the large darkened room are aware of—although none of us can put into words—a strangely evocative appropriateness: as if a message had been transmitted across the darkness and, some time later, a response had been received from a faraway place where the same language was spoken but in a uniquely different way. I ask the students to regard each of these question-answer combinations as a fragment of a lost and irrecoverable whole and to try to read intention and meaning into even the most peculiar of these combinations in order to bring the fragment a few steps closer to its lost wholeness. As they attempt to do this, they are invariably led toward the right brain. Hunches and irrational associations begin to dance in their heads.

The Object/Action exercise provides another I-less writing situation. I hand all students two 3 x 5 cards and have them write OBJECT on one and ACTION on the other. Then I ask them to quickly write three objects (nouns) on one and three actions (verbs) on the other. I caution them not to be too clever or cute but, instead, to satisfy this part of the assignment with simple, ordinary words—no baboons or periwinkles. As soon as they are done, I collect all the object cards in one pile and all the action cards in another, shuffle the cards in each pile, and hand back one card from each pile to each student. I insist that they do not receive either of the two cards they filled out or two cards which appear to have been written by the same person. This requirement is important; it preserves the arbitrary quality of the exercise and all but guarantees that the objects and actions will not neatly and unimaginatively match one another.

Then the job of writing begins. In ten minutes each of us—including me—must write something that uses all the objects and actions named on the cards that he or she is holding. Extra nouns, verbs, and many other parts of speech will also have to be added, but I caution against using more than are really needed. I also caution against making too many unnecessary logical connections between words. For example, if an object is "light bulb" and an action is "wake up," one can say, "The light bulbs are waking up." Any self-respecting four-year-old would understand a statement like that. At the same time, one must avoid deliberately trying to combine words in extravagantly bizarre ways.

When the ten minutes are up, we each read our hit-and-run poem aloud to the group and make at least one comment about something that happened while we were writing it. At the end of this class period, I remind the students that each of them has just written what, at the outset, seemed to be an almost meaningless exercise in manipulating language, and that the excitement generated by the exercise came not from any ordinary kind of direct I-involvement but, instead, from playing with words in order to discover what meanings they might be willing to reveal.

The Hunter/Priest exercise resembles the Object/Action exercise. Each student is given two cards and labels, one HUNTER and the other PRIEST. On the Hunter card, five objects associated with hunting and two qualities or characteristics of a good hunter are to be listed. The Priest card is filled out in a like manner. The cards are then collected in two piles, shuffled, and redistributed to the students as in the Object/Action exercise. But before they start writing, I remind them that we often forget the wider implications of the words "hunter" and "priest." Hunting includes much more than just the pursuit of, for example, game animals. Many of us spend significant portions of our lives hunting for something—love or happiness or friendship. Because of this, we all understand the meaning of Carson McCullers' title The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.
As for "priest," it is not primarily Catholic or even Christian. Long before Christianity, there were priests or people who served priestly functions. They were known by such various names as oracle, seer, shaman, or witch doctor. Whatever other abilities they had, they were gifted intuitively. They knew how to think with their right brains.

I then give students fifteen minutes to write. Their goal is to use all of the words on both cards and, of course, many more words. I caution them not to keep the two worlds of hunter and priest apart. These worlds must intersect in new and unexpected ways. I also tell them that no form of the word "hunt" or "priest" is to be used and that what they write must not sound like a pro- or anti-hunting or -religious tract. Finally, I insist that they begin with one of the following first lines: either "I take one path and then another" or "There are no paths left any more." Whichever line they start with, many students find themselves using "I." Still, this writing exercise is essentially I-less. Combining the two worlds of hunter and priest, students become aware of unexpected opportunities—ways of saying things that they would not have thought of if they had not submitted themselves to the arbitrary rules of this exercise.

These opportunities seem to arise from the language itself, from what it wants to say, and not from their own minds. In truth, the opportunities do arise from their minds, because this exercise seduces them into right-brain kinds of thinking. But because the dark intuitive country of the right brain lies beyond the research of the articulate self-reflective "I," it is always experienced as being "out there." Hence, the very real experience that poets often have: that language sometimes strains to tell them something, if only they knew how to help it begin to speak. The blow of the ax lies curled in the acorn.

Poetry is probably the most right-brained kind of writing there is, except for unusual instances like automatic writing. The in-class writing exercises I use to take students away from their I-problems work, most of the time, because they minimize left-brain thinking and call the right brain into play. In the first five minutes of racing to complete one of these exercises, many students feel that they are doing little more than manipulating words. The ego begins to resent being made to participate in childish games. Then, unaccountably, something happens. The "I" that manipulates this external, and therefore meaningless, material slowly internalizes it and appropriates it. But just as "I" changes and deepens the language it works upon, so, too, the language changes and deepens "I." For a moment, "I" does not quite sound like "I." It sounds like something vaguely familiar but impossible to name. Spanish poet Antonio Machado came close to naming it when he said, "What the poet is looking for is not the fundamental I but the deep you." The fundamental I lives in the left brain, and the deep you lives in the right brain. Like so many next-door neighbors, they are little more than nodding acquaintances. Neither has ever walked out of one's own house to enter the house of the other. Between them is the corpus callosum, a large bundle of interconnecting fibers.

At one end of that dark corridor between them, the left brain calls out its fifteen questions. Into the pause that follows each question comes the right-brain answer. So across their common border, two strangers attempt to communicate with each other. The poet's job is to eavesdrop on these blind conversations.

* * *

The writing exercises described above are adaptations and variations of writing games that have been used in the Poets-in-the-Schools programs for several years. I don't know if any one person can legitimately claim to be the originator of them. If so, I obviously owe him, her, and/or them a debt of gratitude. Although the FITS program is carried on in elementary and secondary schools across the country, these particular writing exercises also work well with college students in beginning poetry writing classes. Recent books by Donald Hall (Goatfoot, Milk Tongue, Twinbird), Richard Hugo (The Triggering Town), and William Stafford (Writing the Australian Crawl) lead me to
believe that the creating processes used by serious mature poets 
are right-brain oriented, though they are not as contrived or as 
arbitrary as the exercises described above.

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THE WORST ENGLISH PAPER EVER
Judith Barisonzi

I'm sure it's happened to you. It's late at night and 
you're plodding through a stack of freshman composition papers, 
frequently pausing to shake your head and mutter unprintable 
comments such as "Don't they teach them anything?" or "Has this 
student really spent twelve years in school?" Then you come upon 
it. There's almost a sense of exhilaration in the recognition: 
"This must be the worst English paper ever written!"

I don't wish to spoil your perverse pleasure in your own 
candidate for this honor, but I must tell you that the paper I am 
about to submit to you for the title of Worst English Paper Ever 
Written is clearly the winner. I know this, because I wrote it 
myself.

It's not easy to write the Worst English Paper Ever. Not 
only must you be familiar with common freshman writing errors and 
put them all together in one paper, you must also compose the 
paper so that it hovers on the verge of making sense but never 
quite achieves rationality. Moreover, the issues involved in the 
selection of the "worst" English paper must not be obscured by 
considering the writing of students who are not native English 
speakers or who have been identified as "basic" writers; the 
paper must be (or appear to be) the effort of an average, 
college-bound product of the average, Anytown U.S.A. high school. 
But enough of introductory comments: first, the paper, which is 
written to answer the following assignment: explain the causes of 
a problem in contemporary society.

UNDERSTANDING

In today's society there are many problems. Some big and 
some small. Since I have to write about a problem, I decided to 
research the question and present the result. My problem is, 
lack of understanding. In this paper I'm going to write about 
it.
There are no proven reasons for lack of understanding but there are three reasons, they are not listening, a person doesn't care, and stupidity.

Some people are just too stupid to understand. It doesn't matter how hard you try, if you don't have the brain power, you won't get it. Studies show that the stupid people are maybe 25%.

Not listening is an important aspect. If a person doesn't listen they could end up missing many things people tell them. Studies show that the listening area is very important in the classroom, some say the most important. This is necessary for everyone to consider. Not listening could be about 40%.

A person doesn't care comes next. We all know someone who doesn't care about anything. You can tell them anything, they just won't listen. They know there going to end up working at McDonalds, so hey, why do they care. How to deal with this is difficult. People have to motivate them. In my opinion I care about this problems alot. Not caring is hard to say exactly, but it could be high, say 35%.

Also there are miscellaneous reasons, like not knowing the language (it could be an immigrant), they need a hearing aid, or your not telling them what they want to hear, so it's hard to understand. All of these add up to about 5%. Communication is the most important facet, so if we all try harder, maybe things will work out.

* * * * *

Quite a number of valuable lessons can be learned from this paper, and it can be a teaching aid in a number of ways. First, let's classify the types of errors. Mechanically, errors are the simplest--use of the apostrophe, confusion of their/there or your/you're, sentence errors (fragments and comma splices), and of course a favorite student word, "alot." The paper also features wild inconsistency in the use of pronouns. Students are usually able to recognize these common errors in the work of others, so you might use this paper for an exercise in proofreading; you should not, however, have the illusion that such practice will reduce the production of similar errors in their own essays.

The next serious problem is limited mastery of language. The paper features vague, abstract terms such as "the listening AREA" or "the most important FACET," both favorite student expressions. Lack of adequate vocabulary prevents the student from making a clear distinction between the existence of "reasons" and the absence of "documented reasons." A vague use of pronouns is also evident, as in "I'm going to write about IT" or "you won't get IT." The paper contains cliches, such as the ever-popular student opening, "In today's society . . ." You might ask students to identify the problem of poor diction and suggest alternative wording for weak expressions.

Next to be considered are problems in development and organization. Statements are not backed up by specific research, although there is an attempt to give the impression of a factual basis for the assertions ("Studies show..."); perhaps the student actually has read an article on problems of communication and remembers it vaguely. Instead of development, filler sentences ("This is necessary for everyone to consider") are used. The opening could just as well be omitted, while the closing lumps together numerous new, undeveloped ideas as "miscellaneous." The second paragraph enumerates major points to be discussed, but the listing lacks parallel structure, and the "development" paragraphs do not follow the order in which the points are listed. In discussing the paper, you could help students explain the problems of lack of development and poor organization, and ask them to suggest ways the paper could be improved.

Most fundamentally, though, the paper fails because it lacks mature thought. The student has not taken the time to understand what he or she is writing about, let alone to find any information about the topic. Is the topic even clearly defined? The opening paragraph conveys a lack of personal interest in the assignment; the student has not attempted to make the assignment his/her own. This paper illustrates the common student belief that mental effort is not required to write a paper; students believe it is sufficient to spin out material from "prior knowledge" without reading or learning anything new. The closing
sentence shows a typical student refusal to engage in thought; instead of reaching a conclusion, the paper ends with a platitude. Like many students, the author of "understanding" wishes to believe that problems can be eliminated by wishing them away. He or she does not understand that it is the responsibility of college-educated professionals to analyze and propose an opportunity for a class to discuss basic issues of the purpose of a liberal education.

We should, however, dutifully note the positive aspects of the paper, since all student writing has positive aspects. The student has arranged the "ideas" in an orderly structure, and has the standard number of points of development, three. There is a general mastery of punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure; the paper is not illiterate. More important, the student could, with a little effort, actually develop some ideas. That he/she has some basic perception of the social and economic problems that lie behind lack of communication can be determined from comments in paragraphs five and six. Paragraph five also shows the student loosening up a bit, and writing of people and perceptions he/she really knows, even though the language ("so hey") is inappropriate in context of the entire paper. Lack of motivation because of meager prospects of a meaningful career and role in society is certainly a problem worth discussing, and this student could probably tell us quite a lot, if he/she engaged in some analytical thought.

It should be evident by now that analyzing a student paper is not simple—something we all knew already, but something many students do not accept, since they think that low grades on papers result from lack of commas. As a teaching aid, this paper can be used to sharpen students' ability to perceive writing problems of increasingly complex kinds. Starting with proofreading, students can be led to see that the problems in the paper are not limited to "mistakes," but involve basic organization and content. Requiring students not only to identify poor writing (and they will all agree that this paper is "not college quality") but to explain why it is inadequate may lead them to the uncomfortable realization that perhaps this paper, though an extreme example, is not fundamentally different from the kinds of papers many of them are writing. They will begin to understand what kind of thinking and writing college requires of them, and perhaps a few of them will seriously try to write better.

Although the Worst English Paper Ever Written can be used in class or small group discussion, it also makes an interesting part of a final exam. I have asked students to simply list as many errors they can find, and graded them on the number of errors identified. This final exam question gives me valuable feedback about how students analyze papers, and the results can be surprising. Students do not, as might be feared, limit themselves to finding simple grammatical errors; almost every student also comments on the organizational problems and lack of content in the paper—an encouraging result. One detail very few notice, however, is that the percentages add up to more than 100%. This recognition requires the ability to look and think back as one reads, instead of moving steadily and inflexibly from beginning to end—an ability lacking not only in basic writers, as Nina Shaughnessy has observed, but among college students generally. Students' failure to observe this inconsistency indicates the need for more instruction in reading strategy.

Another surprising result has been the occasional comment that the paper is biased against stupid people, and would be offensive to them, so paragraph three should be removed. Some students object to the term "stupid" as well as to the writer's attitude of dismissing slow learners. I'm not sure I agree with these comments, but I find their sensitivity appealing. Perhaps having shared papers in writing groups throughout the semester has increased these students' awareness of audience response and taught them to value avoidance of conflict. Their comments raise interesting questions of a writer's relationship to his/her subject and audience, implications of language, and possible censorship of ideas. Should we avoid raising potentially offensive ideas in writing? Should we do so in a non-threatening
way, and if so, how? When we analyze a paper, should we criticize the writer's ideas, or confine ourselves to discussing how well these ideas are expressed? All of these questions could productively be incorporated in the composition curriculum.

You may not wish to use my Worst English Paper Ever in your class. Probably you will prefer to write your own. I think you will find, however, that studying such a paper provides a valuable exercise for students, who are accustomed to looking at examples of professional writing which seem hopelessly beyond their abilities. It will also enable you to determine what your students have absorbed from your teaching, as well as what you might learn from their reactions. Students seem to enjoy this assignment, probably because it reinforces the feeling of achievement which they should be gaining as the semester progresses. No matter how many red marks have adorned their papers, surely, they feel, their writing is better than this! Some shake their heads sadly as they bring their list of errors to my desk, pitying the poor student who (unlike themselves!) will obviously never pass freshman composition, but is doomed to a lifetime of writing ever worse English papers.

NOTES
Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford, 1977). Although Shaughnessy describes the writing practices of basic writers, my experience suggests that they are not a breed apart from run-of-the-mill freshman composition students in many of their reading and writing habits.

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"FROM SOUTH TO NORTH, USA: THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THE PLAYS OF AUGUST WILSON."
Beverly-Lynne Aronowitz

In the setting notes to introduce the first act, August Wilson makes explicit the African-American immigrant experience as the social and emotional context of Fences.

Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. . . .

The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work.

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome nor participation. They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama. . . . They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the river banks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tar paper . . . and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream: that they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. ("Setting," Fences. THEATRE (Yale, Summer/Fall, 1985), I,1,39).

If any of us were present at the Yale production from April 30th to May 25th, 1985, we would have entered the theatre on York Street in New Haven to find a "two-story brick house set back off a small alley in a big neighborhood city." ("Setting," I,1,39). Although such humble and sad housing exists for the play in 1957 and later in 1964, similar, nearly impoverished dwellings exist in our 1980's in cities such as Asbury Park, East Orange and Newark, where black families work hard to scrape together a
decent but threadbare subsistence. Memory of the past, too, hovers and influences these lives and these wills to assert and succeed, memory of that journey, now mythical, from South to North, U.S.A. Remembered and retold through the decades by the old to the young are those initial hopes but final disappointments of that emigration, this story gradually becoming family, then racial myth. Through the telling came a way to understand the past and explain the present, a way to reify past courage but come to terms with present need and present failure.

Many in the public domain tell us that the disruption in African-American family life might be traced to an outmoded welfare system; to the ghetto as an attitude rather than a place; to a weak male, to a dominant female, the single parent; to the absence of skills, to permanent joblessness, to the lure of the underground economy, drugs. The list goes on. For the playwright, this list of evils is the consequence of a tragic history of a people who, at the turn of this century, immigrated from South to North. Their trials and disappointments, especially in the face of the successes of European counterparts, have had emotional and psychological impact and long-lasting consequences on African-American family life and on the individual African-American psyche.

August Wilson's dramatic rendering of the breakdown of the traditional African-American family has been evaluated in sociological and political discussions, especially with the objective to suggest remedies to restore time-honored values within family life. We are reminded of Eleanor Holmes Norton's 1985 New York Times Magazine article which appeared on the 20th anniversary of the controversial "Moyihian Report" written when that senator was Assistant Secretary of Labor. (Daniel P. Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Labor, 1965.)

Moynihan argued that the single-parent household, headed by women was preventing African-American males from benefiting and participating in the American power structure; lack of cohesive family life rather than racism was seen as the primary source for the inability of males to succeed. Michele Wallace, a young African-American woman, wrote an angry retort to Moynihan's conclusions, interpreting his stance as an attack on women of her race and culture. Wallace's book proved equally controversial. (Black Macho and the Myth of The Superwoman, 1980.)

Troy Maxon, the central figure of Fences, is a strong man, a responsible man, but a deeply angry man. Each dramatic episode, built on conflict between Troy and other family members, is energized by Troy's present anger based on past frustration; his father's callous mistreatment of the youthful Troy; his failed professional baseball career; his inability--that is up to the present action--to succeed to a position better than refuse collector because of northern Jim Crow. Nevertheless, Troy is a dutiful man who feels responsible. After a work week of hard labor, Friday evenings find Troy and his longtime pal Bono walking back to the Maxon house, laughing, talking, opening up a bottle--a joyful ritual to forget a week which ate away at his life's purpose and manhood. But first and dutifully, Troy offers up his paycheck to Rose who always has something good waiting on the stove (meatloaf, baked limas and cornbread). They settle down to reminisce, that tradition of telling long stories.

James Earl Jones and Mary Alice, who initially interpreted the roles of Troy and Rose Maxon, speak of the play's structural aspects adapted from African-American tradition; they especially appreciate the "black dialect" and the story-telling form. In "Building Fences: An interview with Mary Alice and James Earl Jones," (Yale THEATRE. Summer/Fall, 1985), 67-70, Mary Alice notes she "can also relate to the oral tradition" apparent in the play. "...my grandfather, my father, even my mother were always telling stories. That is a very African tradition. Dark people did not write it; it was passed on orally. That's very much a part of what I heard in the play." (69).

James Earl Jones continues: "Yes. My summer nights in Michigan were very similar to this play's situation. I don't remember who wouldn't take it upon himself to entertain or tell a story. On summer nights the gatherings would happen on a porch.
Somebody would end up telling a story, and someone else—visitors, guests—would counter with another story." (69).

What Troy and Bono get down to is the myth of immigration, "the walking blues." Bono remembers: "Back in those days what you talking about... niggers used to travel all over. They get up one day and see where the day ain't sitting right with them and they walk out their front door and just take on down one road or another and keep on walking... Ain't owned nothing but was on their back... so you didn't have to worry about leaving nothing behind or carrying nothing with you for that matter. Just walk on till you come to something else. Ain't you never heard of nobody having the walking blues? Well that's what you call it when you just take off like that." (I,ii,51).

When Troy was young he walked too: "I walked on down to Mobile and hitched up with some of them fellows that was heading this way. Got up here and found out... not only couldn't you get a job... you couldn't find no place to live. I thought I was in freedom. Shh." (I,ii,52).

One way to defeat Jim Crow was to enter professional sports; but thinking back to the forties a mere token for integration comes to mind, Jackie Robinson, for example. It was color, Troy insists, that barred him: "I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were." (I,i,41).

But Rose, a rational calming voice, reminds Troy: "Troy, why don't you admit you was too old to play in the major leagues? For once... why don't you admit that?" (I,iii,48).

Rose's remark underlines the irrational component of Troy's anger, a mixture of his reaction to injustice heightened by personal distortion, which, had Troy the insight and the will, could be righted. But Troy acts wholly on perceptions warped by years of bitter regret. Acting on these feelings, for example, he denies his son the opportunity to take a football scholarship.

Cory's only way to enter college: "I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football." (I,i,41).

Rose counters: "Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. That was before the war. Times have changed a lot since then." (I,i,41).

Times, although tough and unfair still for the Afro-American, have changed—even for Troy; Act I concludes with Troy's successful grievance to his union to be the city's first Negro driver rather than hauler of refuse. Troy's triumph makes no dent, however, in those years of accumulated anger. He feels fenced in and fences out those who love him: his escape—predictably, destructively—another woman. Troy confesses to Rose: "I'm gonna be a daddy. I'm gonna be somebody's daddy." (II,i,55).

Rose's justified outrage indicts not only Troy but a pattern of black family life:

Been married eighteen years and I got to live to see the day you tell me you been seeing another woman and done fathered a child by her. And you know I ain't never wanted no half nothing in my family. My whole family is half. Everybody got different fathers and mothers... my two sisters and my brother. Can't hardly tell who's who. Can't never sit down and talk about Papa and Mama. It your papa and your mama and my papa and my mama..." (II,II,56).

Through Rose, the playwright courageously confesses the instability of black family life. But Rose's outcry also confirms what Afro-Americans feel to be wholesome and good; she offers the ideal of a whole family to be prized and striven for, an ideal indeed confirmed by many African-Americans. If any of us were witness to that performance, Rose's outcry would have captured our feelings in just that compelling way theatre takes hold. It took guts, I feel, for the playwright to tell it like it is rather than shrink behind "uplift" dialogue and plot. Wilson is asking us to look at the complexities created by personal shortcomings exacerbated by racial history. He's not
making excuses, only probing beyond the stereotype to understand. Part of our understanding comes from empathetic knowledge of the unfortunate immigration experiences of "free" African-Americans coming from South to North.

Along with story telling, African-Americans sing about their history and about themselves to understand and take hold of life: They call it the blues.

Ma Rainey: White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life.

Cutler: That's right. You get that understanding and you done got a grip on life to where you can hold your head up and go on to see what else life to offer. (Ma Rainey's 'Black Bottom.' N.Y.: MAL/Plume, 1985, II, 82-83).

Wilson sets Ma Rainey in a recording studio, "the Race division" in 1927. (Program Notes. Yale Repertory Theatre. April 3 to April 21, 1984.) The lead character is based on Gertrude Fidgett (1866-1939) who, along with the better-known Bessie Smith won contracts to record the blues for commercial distribution; for, suddenly, in the twenties, in northern cities, the recorded music of black Americans for black Americans became a lucrative commodity.

"... blues, until the time of the classic blues was largely a functional music (the work song) ... The idea of blues as a form of music that could be used to entertain people on a professional basis, i.e., that people would actually pay to see and hear blues performed, was a revelation. And it was a revelation that gave large impetus to the concept of the 'race' record, commercial recordings aimed strictly toward the Negro market. ..." (LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka]. Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It. N.Y.: 1963, 98-99. Cited in the Yale Repertory Theatre Program Notes, Ma Rainey, April 3-21, 1984.)

The action of the play is set in a recording studio during a recording session: Irvin and Mel have contracted Ma Rainey and her small band, musicians all their lives, who tour southern "tent shows," northern Negro night clubs, whorehouses. We suspect the recordings made this particular afternoon will yield more profit for the company than the modest wages paid to the musicians. The relationship between employers and musicians is tense, the musicians wary of a hassle simply because they are black. For instance, the men need to be paid in cash: "See a nigger with a check, the first thing they think is he done stole it someplace." (II,106).

Ma Rainey, too, is poised to feel out and avoid exploitation, to exact her payment of respect: "Madame Rainey! Get it straight! Madame Rainey!" (I,49). Majestic Ma Rainey is always in control: "Why you all keep it so cold in here? ... you all wanna make some records, you better put some heat on in here. ..." (I,52). "What you all say don't count with me. You understand? Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice insider her." (I,63). "We'll be ready to go when Madame says we're ready. That the way it goes around here." (I, 64).

"Where's my Coke? I need a coke . . . . You know I don't sing nothing without my Coca-Cola!" (II,76)

Regal and petulant--but to a purpose--Ma can have it her way: she will record her version of 'Black Bottom,' a down-home version and insist that her stuttering nephew introduce the recording--just to build his confidence and put him on the payroll. She knows she is being exploited, but she'll take what she can get and give back as little as possible to Mr. Charlie: "Ma don't stand for no shit. Wanna take my voice and trap it in them fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials . . . and then too cheap to buy me a Coca-Cola." (II, 79).

The playtext heard at Yale Rep and the New American Library text differ in a small but essential way, relevant to Wilson's abiding involvement with the parallel experience of immigrating African-American and Europeans. The record company execs periodically appease Ma's temperamental outbursts with dialogue
this audience member heard as "Remember, Ma, we Blacks and Jews got to stick together." The NAL text offers only Ma's cynical reminder to Irving and Mel "to stick together" when she thinks them out of line; racial references are omitted.

Ma Rainey: You watch Irvin right there with the rest of them. He don't care nothing about me either. He's been my manager for six years, always talking about sticking together, and the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends.

Reference to dissonance between races might be too sensitive a topic, just as the uncomfortable reference "Race Division" printed in the original Yale Rep Program Notes is omitted from the setting notes of the NAL text. Clearly, Wilson made some compromises; but, I feel, the playwright had the immigration motif in mind, and was dramatizing through the evocation of "Black" and "Jew" the uncomfortable scenario of one group prospering guilefully at the expense of another.

In Ma Rainey, Levee, the young trumpeter, plays out the urge to destroy because he is prevented from succeeding. The playwright juxtaposes Levee's inexperience and ignitable temperament with the stronger, controlled and controlling (as much as she is able) Ma Rainey. Levee naively believes the record company will support his rendition of the music—a jazzer, fast-paced version—to Ma Rainey's, that he will be offered star status and a band of his own. But Ma has the last word. Levee must settle for five dollars for each of his renditions—nothing more. In truth, he has sold his soul (his music, himself) to the devil; previously, the band members had engaged in a lengthy story-telling session about a carpetbagger trading in souls for the devil. Levee is emasculated. In an uncontrolled gesture of rage—the rage Troy Maxon feels every day but keeps under wraps—he turns on his own brother, a fellow Black, a fellow musician (Toledo) and stabs him. Levee is, of course, stabbing at the oppressor through Toledo. He is nearly insensible to what he has done:

(Toledo is limp and heavy and awkward. He slumps back to the floor. Levee gets mad at him.)

Don't look at me like that! Toledo! Nigger, don't look at me like that! ... tell him to close his eyes . . . . (The sound of a trumpet is heard. Levee's trumpet, a muted trumpet struggling for the highest of possibilities and blowing pain and warning.) (II, 111).

The play ends on this note of frenzied desperation.

The metaphor of the blues as African-Americans' expression of self-sufficiency in Ma Rainey is reiterated as "song" in Wilson's recently produced play Joe Turner's Come and Gone. The setting, a boarding house in Pittsburgh, 1911: the chaos of the Reconstruction seventy years earlier is reflected, still, in the immigrants who find their way to Seth Holly's establishment. Seth has inherited his home from his father, a northern "freedman" who "ain't never even seen no cotton!" (THEATRE [Yale, Summer/Fall, 1986], II, 193). Although settled and feeling superior to the wandering souls who come to rest for a while at his house, Seth shares with these sojourners—but reticent to admit it—the emotional displacement of being frustrated in his efforts to succeed. Seth has a practical vision for success: he wants to create his own business around his skill of crafting pots from sheet metal but is denied by skeptical (or jealous? or exploiting?) town bankers:

They can't see that. . . . Now how much sense it take to see that? . . . one man making pots is five men making fifty pots. But they can't see that . . . . Neither Mr. Cohen nor Sam Green . . . want me to sign over the house to borrow five hundred dollars. I ain't that big a fool. That's all I got. Sign it over to them and then I won't have nothing." (II, 76).

In contrast to the others, Seth Holly has no myths to haunt him, no dreams to sustain him. He is a realist, a cynic. He is a man with no patience for "songs."
Bynum, a longtime resident of the Holly household, a root man, a seer, a teller of Negro myths of resurrection and salvation ("the shiny man," "bones on the water") defines "the song" as finding one's self-sufficiency, being able to act effectively and, in turn, receive recognition from others: this kind of "song" was rarely learned or bitterly learned by the African-American immigrant. If a man has his song and it is "accepted," says Bynum, he "done left his mark on life," and his song "works its full power in the world." (I, 68).

Herald Loomis appears on the scene with his daughter Zonia. Tormented by the memory of his experience of Joe Turner, a slave-master no longer sanctioned by law but by force, Loomis comes north to look for Martha, his wife, these past seven years lost to him while in bondage to Turner. Just a first glance at Loomis, Bynum knows him as one of Joe Turner's captives, a marked man. Under his breath he sings the myth made of the tragic realities of the many captured by the dominant few, all the Joe Turners:

Ohhh Lordy
They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone
Ohhh Lordy
Got my man and gone. (II, 83).

Loomis is possessed with loss, faithlessness. Where was God when the Joe Turners hunted up whole bands of men and kept them in enforced labor years on end? Outraged, maddened, Loomis turns on the boarding house tenants in the midst of a Juba, a joyous "call and response" dance, Christianized from African origin.


At the play's end, Loomis encounters his wife, is satisfied just to look into her eyes and to reunite her with Zonia. Martha has become a worker for the church, a deeply religious Christian. To her face, one last time, Loomis denies the Christian God but regains his song of self-sufficiency. He says to Martha: "Great big old white man . . . your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton." (II, 88).

Martha pleads that he must open his heart, and Loomis replies:

I been wading in the water. I been walking all over the river Jordan. But what it get me, huh? I done been baptized with the blood of the lamb and the fire of the Holy Ghost. But what I got, huh? I got salvation? My enemies all around me picking the flesh from my bones. I'm choking on my own blood and all you got to give me is salvation? (II, 88).

When Martha implores Loomis to be cleansed by "the blood of the lamb," Loomis provides his own blood for his own resurrection: he slashes himself across the chest. With this act comes Loomis' denial of the oppressing white man's God but the resurrection of Loomis' freedom and self-sufficiency.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone adapts as a major motif a poetic, metaphorical expression based on African-American myth. The episodic structure allows the several characters, fellow wanderers, their "arias" of loss, loneliness and disappointment. Metaphor and myth lend expressivity to history, that epoch around 1911 when Afro-Americans walked from South to North, U.S.A.: "They arrive carrying bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope . . . . Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and disbursement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to re-connect, to re-assemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whoop of joy." ("Setting Notes," I, 65).

In contrast to the European immigrant, the African-American immigrant ended in economic, psychological and emotional disorientation, with wounds so deep, the hurt has touched the lives of African-American citizens in our decade.
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Fences. THEATRE. Yale: Summer/Fall, 1985.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone. THEATRE. Yale: Summer/Fall, 1986.


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This extraordinarily sensitive novel hones in on the trials and tensions of competitive swimming. It also expresses the inner life of Alex Archer in her experiences with friends and family.

The leading New Zealand contender, Alex's assurance of being an Olympic prospect is jeopardized by the arrival of Maggie Burton from Singapore. In their races, Alex usually takes second place, often pushing Maggie to a new record. Alex trains hard; she's as dedicated as Maggie. But she can't give up other activities she loves—school theatre, piano, ballet, hockey—and her studies. Maggie concentrates on swimming. The pressure builds: to get the Olympic berth Alex must beat Maggie at the nationals.

However, for Alex it is the emotional complications that become formidable. Insinuations about her sexuality which she overhears in a women's room, upset her and throw her off balance. A fractured leg from a hockey accident creates emotional as well as physical turmoil. But the near-crushing blow to her equilibrium is the death of Andy, her beloved special friend, in a bicycle-automobile accident.

The novel is written with two time frames. Short, italicized segments between each chapter, present Alex swimming the nationals race from starting block to finish, each agonizing move expressed step-by-step. This dynamic technique sharpens the effects of the already strong narrative. And Alex, a credible, intense character, is thoroughly empathetic. This book is highly recommended.


Almost-sixteen-year-old Andrea Tagg returns to her island home after giving up her baby for adoption. She feels at odds with herself, totally alienated from her family, who never acknowledge her situation, and her friends, from whom she feels disassociated. She needs to talk about her baby, the emptiness she feels, but cannot. Frustrated, she takes her anger out on all of them as well as on the tourists. When Swede appears, ostensibly to check on the building of his parents' summer home, he is cold-shouldered.
Unexpectedly, a relationship starts between this unlikely pair. Swede, AWOL from the Army, also feels alienated and angry. Their mutual need draws them together and unites them. She is able to talk about her loss, he about his dilemma. They find support in each other and gain a degree of courage to face their situations. Though they plan to run away, at last, Swede returns to the Army to face the charges against him and Andrea returns to school. His letter to her, at the book’s close, promises his return.

The pace of this novel is fairly even, without dramatic shifts in plot. But its characters are endearing. Their struggle to find understanding at a chaotic time in their lives seems honest, as does the slight bright edge of hope on the horizon at the conclusion.


The naval battle early in the Civil War between the first two ironclad ships, the South’s Merrimack and the North’s Monitor was critical eventually in the outcome of the war. This novel, featuring thirteen-year old Eben Tyne, takes readers into that situation aboard the Merrimack. Energetic, courageous and capable, he serves as powdermonkey to the gunners. Through his eyes we witness the Merrimack’s victorious first battle against wooden ships—the clouds of smoke, the thunderous cannon, the burning ships—and her second one, ending in a defeat to the Union’s Monitor. The narrative is peppered with exciting incidents, including the discovery of a Union spy.

After the defeat the ship’s crew escapes to join land forces defending Richmond. During a skirmish, several of them, including Eben, are captured by Union soldiers. The situation that brings about his release from prison will be satisfactory to young readers but seems rather unlikely.

The strengths of this book are its depiction of the naval scenes and battles and the representation of life and mores of the 1860’s. Rare, indeed, is a Civil War book set in the South, giving vivid expression to southern loyalties. These outweigh the somewhat stilted dialog and occasionally flat prose.

The preceding three reviews are by Nicholas Karolides, Department of English, UW-River Falls.

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