RESPONSIVE WRITING: CONNECTING LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION

The interaction between literature and composition is a fascinating topic. It is one where every instructor has hunches but little proof. The reasons for lack of evidence to support our hunches are not hard to find. This interaction between text and writer depends on the writer as reader. That interaction is complex, difficult to trace. A succession of doctoral studies, including my own, has dealt with it and found that the instruments we use to get at it, to measure it, are indeed few and inadequate. The further interaction between literary text and student composition is in some ways even more difficult to trace, at least as we have attempted it traditionally.

Most teachers attempt to get at this interaction through the book report, which is still with us despite all our attempts to refine it, to change it to deal with only one aspect of a literary work, to make it something imaginative. Most of the time the book report still asks children as its first question: Did you read the novel or biography, the whole work? A second question seems to be this, inevitably: Did you understand it? Perhaps, and only perhaps, a third question is asked: What did you make of it? Now it is the third question that gets at interaction between text and reader. It is this question that the researcher is interested in, as is the teacher who wants literature to be pleasurable for students. It is this teacher who wants the reading of literature to become a lifelong experience for students.

Most of our students are convinced that we are interested in questions one and two and are busily trying to prove that they did read the work and did understand it. They are not concerned with question three and, alas, neither are many of their teachers.

If our focus in teaching literature is understanding literature as art, there are other, more rigorous ways of getting at this understanding. There is a world of difference between the simple task attempted in the book report and the more complex task attempted in the explication and analysis of a poem, short story, or novel or the task involved in writing a precis of an essay. Only a minority of our students, those in academic sections, are likely to get to the analysis or the precis in the eleventh or twelfth grades.

Are there other ways that enable students to achieve understanding and to respond to the text? Is it possible to ask students to respond to the text in writing in such a way as to indicate their understanding of it and their feelings about it? A resource seldom used by many teachers is responsive writing. Responsive writing is my focus here. Two kinds of responsive writing derive directly from the literary text, and the third is strongly dependent on the framework of ideas coming from the text.
James Moffett, you recall, reminded us in his book Teaching The Universe of Discourse that dialogue may be the easiest kind of written composition because it is closest to the language of ordinary speech, and the writer doesn’t have to worry about anything much except whether the language is authentic for the situation at hand. At the Northridge Writing Project, we have found that dialogue and certain kinds of structured responsive writing, for example, the interior monologue, are also highly useful for written composition deriving from literature. We are going beyond the uses that Moffett advocated for dialogue as used in natural real life situations. Reluctant writers, writers low in written language skills, as well as abler writers, like dialogue writing and enjoy sharing their dialogues within small groups or sometimes with the whole class. They like to do so, we suppose, partly because they can assume the personas of the literary characters about whom they are writing and thus do not encounter the problem of deciding about their own voice, their own stance, their own pattern of organization. Thus dialogue writing serves as a starting point in composition writing, where students write and share and evaluate. But equally as important, these forms of writing provide a pleasurable way of allowing students to get “inside” a literary work and look at the world through the eyes of the characters.

Let me illustrate with a simple poem by Lew Sarett. The poem “Four Little Foxes” is not a great poem, but it engages children and adolescents. Here it is.

FOUR LITTLE FOXES
Lew Sarett

Speak gently, Spring, and make no sudden sound;
For in my windy valley, yesterday I found
New-born foxes squirming on the ground—
    Speak gently.
Walk softly, March, forbear the bitter blow;
Her feet within a trap, her blood upon the snow,
The four little foxes saw their mother go—
    Walk softly.
Go lightly, Spring, oh, give them no alarm;
When I covered them with boughs to shelter them from harm
The thin blue foxes suckled at my arm—
    Go lightly.
Step softly, March, with your rampant hurricane;
Nuzzling one another, and whimpering with pain,
The new little foxes are shivering in the rain—
    Step softly.

Fifth graders at Valerio Street School in Van Nuys responded well to it. Most of these students are Hispanic, many of them recently out of ESL classes. They made the decision
that the speaker in the poem is probably a naturalist, someone who lives in the area (he calls it “my valley”) and feels some responsibility for the creatures who live in the area. They also made the decision that the trap was set either by a trapper, someone who made his living trapping animals, or by a farmer, who was guarding his chickens or rabbits against foxes.

There is in these children a reluctance to see that these little foxes are doomed, that they cannot live without their mother. Despite being given evidence by their teacher, Mrs. Linda Short, that these foxes could hardly have survived, these children indicated their preference for saving the little foxes in their dialogues. Here are two of these dialogues:

**UNCORRECTED FIRST DRAFT**

**Alexandra**

Naturalist: Hy I came to talk to you about something.
Trapper: Yes about what.
N: Well you see this morning I went to the Forrest with my dogs and I saw four little foxes and somebody kill their mother because she was within a trap and her blood upon the snow and if somebody kill her, that person might be you because you and me are the only persons that live around here.
Trapper: Yes I kill her because she use to come and badder my chikens so I decide to kill her.
H. We are going to go to court because you don’t have no right to do that.
Trapper: Oh yeah ok tomorrow morning see you there.
N: Ok see you there.
N: So finally I won and he went to jail for 4 years and I always use to go to the Forrest and give the four little foxes shelter food and protec them from harm.

The End

**Paul**

Naturalist: I have to talk to you.
Trapper: About What?
Naturalist: Today I was walking in the woods and found four little foxes squirming on the ground.
Trapper: Where was their mother?
Naturalist: That’s why I came. There mom was in a trap.
Trapper: That’s so sad.
Naturalist: Did you set that trap?
Trapper: Yes.
Naturalist: Why?
Trapper: She killed all my chickens.
Naturalist: You can get rocks and put them around the chicken wire.
Trapper: I think I will do that, Thanks.
Naturalist: My pleasure.
The End

In a number of other dialogues that these children wrote, the trapper and the naturalist are able to come to an agreement to build a fence, a barrier to protect the farm animals against the foxes, so that the trapper will not have to trap foxes any more.

We have also used the chapter “The Wolf Pack” and part of the succeeding chapter in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House on the Prairie with both upper elementary children and junior high students. In this episode Pa returns to the Ingalls family late in the afternoon after being threatened by wolves, big buffalo wolves. That night the family stays in their lonely little unfinished cabin located in the Indian country, probably southern Kansas of the 1870s. The cabin has no door, only a blanket over the opening, and no panes or shutters for the two windows on each side of the single room. Nor is there a roof. Pa with his rifle watches so that no wolves enter through the windows, and faithful Jack, the Ingalls’ dog, paces in the doorway in front of the blanket. Only Laura wants to stay up to hear the wolves and to look at them through the window as they ring the little cabin.

We have used three situations from this episode in the life of the Ingalls family where dialogue must certainly have taken place. The first is a dialogue between Pa and Caroline, the mother, after the children have been put to bed right after supper. Charles and Caroline do not discuss danger to the family and strategies for dealing with it, nor their feelings about it in front of the children. These are nineteenth century parents. But they must have held such a discussion that evening. The second situation is Mary talking to Ma the next morning as Ma prepares breakfast and Mary helps. Ma and Mary are the two who rise early, certainly before Laura is up and about. Ma and Mary are much alike and work together well. Neither of them sees danger as an adventure as Laura and Pa do. The third situation is one in which Laura helps Pa make the door to the cabin the next day right after breakfast. What did the two talk about as they made a door for the little cabin?

In junior and senior high school we have also used “Cerelle,” a literary ballad. Its action takes place in nineteenth century Texas. Students need to begin their study of this poem with an examination of a map of Texas. They need to locate Galveston, a coastal city, really an island city, a port at this time, with humid, foggy weather. It is complete contrast to the dry, hot hill country of west central Texas. This ballad, by Margaret Bell Houston, makes more demands on readers. As in all ballads, much of the action takes place “off stage” and must be inferred. The composition assignments we have worked with also make more demands upon student writers.

**CERELLE**
Margaret Bell Houston

There was a score of likely girls
Around the prairie-side,
But I went down to Galveston
And brought me home a bride.

A score or more of handsome girls,
Of proper age and size,
But the pale girls of Galveston
Have sea-shine in their eyes.

As pale as any orange flower,
Cerelle. The gold-white sands
Were like her hair, and drifting shells,
White fairy shells, her hands.

I think she liked my silver spurs
A-clinking in the sun
She'd never seen a cowboy till
I rode to Galveston

She'd never known the chaparral,
Nor smell of saddle leather
Nor seen a round-up or a ranch,
Till we rode back—together.

Shall I forget my mother's eyes?
"Is this the wife you need?
Is this the way you bring me rest
From forty men to feed?"

Cerelle—I think she did her best
All year. She'd lots to learn.
Dishes would slip from out her hands
And break, the bread would burn.

And she would steal away at times
And wander off to me,
And when the wind was in the south
She'd say, "I smell the sea!"

She changed. The white and gold grew dull,
As when a soft flame dies,
And yet she kept until the last
The sea-shine in her eyes.

There are (I make a husband's boast)
No stronger arms than Ann's
She has a quip for all the boys,
And sings among the pans.
At last my mother takes her rest,
And that’s how things should be,
But when the wind is in the south
There is no rest for me.

The first dialogue that we asked for here was one between the cowboy and his mother, a conversation that might have taken place after the death of Cerelle. Here the student writer must account for the fact that despite his love for Cerelle the cowboy married again, this time “a likely girl,” a choice that must have pleased his mother. The second dialogue was one between the mother and Ann soon after Ann has married the cowboy. Students must grapple with the questions of whether either of them would mention Cerelle and of how Ann feels in her role as she realized she is a second choice. The third dialogue was between Ann and her cowboy-rancher husband. Here students must ask what the two would talk about. Is the shadow of Cerelle between them? How does the cowboy act toward this wife? And how does Ann, who “has a quip for all the boys,” talk when she and her husband are together, perhaps at the end of a hard day’s work? These dialogues make rather heavy demands upon students.

The dialogue for “Cerelle” can also be followed by an expository composition, one concerning the status of women then and now. Most students recognize that Cerelle really has no alternative, she must succeed as a rancher’s wife once she has married her love and left Galveston. She cannot return. But today’s bride might feel she has a number of choices.

We have also worked with another form of responsive writing, the interior monologue. This kind of writing is harder to do. The student writer must be true to the character and to the action as it is presented in the literary text and must “go it alone” to present the thoughts, the inner life of one of the characters he or she met in the literary work. (The task of writing a good interior monologue is very close to the task achieved by many successful writers. Some short stories are almost entirely interior monologues.) Some elementary school children and most junior and senior high school students enjoy trying to write an interior monologue. Often we supply a first line (as we often do in asking for a dialogue) to help them focus on the task and get underway. Students may use our lead or disregard it and furnish their own.

One story which has proved to be demanding but also rewarding for students in junior and senior high school is “Gaston,” by William Saroyan. This story, told almost completely in dialogue, has two central characters. The adult character is a man, an artist or writer, probably in his mid-thirties, who has not yet become successful. He is divorced, living alone in Paris, in an apartment. His daughter, a little girl of about six who is visiting him, has found both the apartment and her father a little difficult to come to know and accept. A accustomed to her mother’s wealth and status, and knowing that her mother views her father askance, the girl finds it difficult to fit into her father’s world. The father feels that he has made a breakthrough in establishing rapport with his daughter as the two of them share some fresh peaches at a table in the apartment on a hot afternoon on the
second day of her stay with him. Out of his peach, a flawed one which he has kept for
himself, has come a great green bug, a worm with all kinds of knobs and feelers. The
father, instead of squishing the bug as the daughter expects him to do, gives the insect an
identity and a situation; he is Gaston the grand boulevardier, who suddenly finds himself
with no home, no friends, in a totally strange environment. Intrigued by this imaginative
account, the girl no longer wants to squish the bug; indeed she asks for a “peach with a
person in it.” The father goes out to seek another flawed peach. While he is gone on the
errand, the mother telephones and tells the child that she is sending the limousine after
her to return so that she may attend a birthday party before they leave Paris to return to
the United States. She assures the little girl that the Gaston business is just part of her
father’s craziness and that bugs are to be squished. When the father returns, he sees at
once that his child has changed, Gaston is gone, and that his daughter is preparing to
leave. It is with this context that students are asked to write an interior monologue that
gives the father’s thought processes when he returns, sizes things up, packs his daughter’s
belongings, and takes them down to the limousine. They must account for the change, for
the fact that he does not even hug his daughter when he says goodbye to her. Indeed, the
parallel between Gaston and the father is complete at the close of the story.

We have also used a short story, “I Spy,” by Graham Greene. It is the story of Charlie
Stowe, a twelve-year-old, who steals cigarettes from his father’s tobacconist shop
beneath the apartment where the family lives. Almost all of the meaning of events in the
story must be inferred and even the setting, which is Eastern England, near the coast
during World War I. Charlie, who must hide beneath the counter to avoid detection when
his father enters the shop with two men, is unaware that he has witnessed his father’s
being taken into custody for treason. The reader can speculate that Charlie’s patriotic
mother and Charlie himself, who wants so much to do what other twelve-year-olds have
done, will be in for a great surprise the next day when the news of what Charlie’s father
has done will become public. Meanwhile Charlie has made a discovery—that he is much
more like his quiet, secretive father than he is like his boisterous mother. From this
situation we have students assume the persona of Charlie and write a letter to his father
indicating what Charlie has learned about himself and what action Charlie’s mother
takes. Here is one such letter from a class of sophomores at Kennedy High School. The
teacher is Ms. Anne Faigen. The letter seems faithful to the character of Charlie Stowe
and seems to account rather realistically for what might well have happened next.

Dear Father,

I just found out why those men took you away. They say you committed treason
and I don’t understand what that means. Mom tried to explain, but I still don’t
completely understand. Mother is angry at you but I’m not mad even though I
don’t know what you did wrong. I hope you can come back home soon because I
miss you. Even though I never told you this, I really do care for you. I hope some
day you can tell me why you did what you did when you knew it was wrong. We’re
living out in the country now with uncle. Mother had a hard time dealing with the
people in the city. Everyone seemed to hate us for no reason; that’s why we
moved away. Mother doesn’t do anything any more, she’s never happy, and she
doesn’t see her friends. She never wants to talk about you. Don’t tell mom I wrote you. I overheard the policeman giving mom the address; that’s how I got it.

Your son,
Charlie

Dialogues, interior monologues, letters are all enjoyable composition assignments which enable a student to assume a persona, to reconstruct imaginatively through the eyes of one character the events in a literary text, and to interact imaginatively with the text. These assignments get at the level of understanding of the text and indicate the degree of empathy which the student brings to characters and situations. They represent an easier task in composing in that it is not the writer’s own self and own logic and convictions that are recorded for examination by peers and teacher.

Let us turn to the second area of interaction between literature and composition. This is one in which the student writer is attempting approximately the same task as the published writer, using the published writer’s syntax but the student’s own language and ideas. The idea of imitation, even for elementary school students, is not new. Twelve years ago a curriculum project at Northwestern University used the description of the barn in Charlotte’s Web as the basis for imitation, in one instance group writing done by fourth graders. Children love the description of the barn in Charlotte’s Web. For them it is a lovely, desirable, safe place even to the smell of hay and smell of manure. The inner city children who wrote following this model describe their school room using the same structure to convey the same sense of security and desirability that was conveyed in the description of the barn in Charlotte’s Web. We are approaching imitation today with a new sophistication. We know where to look to find texts to imitate. In novels or novellas for adolescents it is often at the beginning of the novel, where the writer must work hardest to involve his reader and where he often achieves this involvement through the use of sensory description.

We also know how to help the reader achieve his goal more readily. We can help the writer note the organization of the original text. The writer can make lists of possible useful details ahead of time, as he or she would for any major composition. But we can also cue the writer to the structure demanded by placing the published writer’s text on one side of the paper and on the other side the structure words, the --ing phrases, and the tense indicators which point to the syntax the student should try to use. We have worked with a number of descriptions, using excerpts from Laura Ingalls Wilder, William Manchester, and Bruce Catton.

One person who has been helpful in showing us how to set up imitation exercises has been William Strong of Utah State University. In using the first paragraphs of Steinbeck’s The Pearl, Strong places the model for students parallel to Steinbeck’s paragraphs. A careful look at the model shows that he is pointing to the structures.
Kino awakened in the near dark.
The stars still shone and the day had
drawn only a pale wash of light in the
lower sky to the east. The roosters
had been crowing for some time, and
the early pigs were already beginning
their ceaseless turning of twigs and
bits of wood to see whether anything
to eat had been overlooked. Outside
the brush house in the tuna clump,
a covey of little birds chittered
and flurried with their wings.
Kino’s eyes opened, and he
looked first at the lightening square
which was the door and then he looked
at the hanging box where Coyotito
slept. And last he turned his head
to Juana, his wife, who lay beside
him on the mat, her blue shawl over
her nose and over her breasts and
over the small of her back. Juana’s
eyes were open too. Kino could never
remember seeing them closed when he
awakened. Her dark eyes made little
reflected stars. She was looking at
him as she was always looking at him
when he awakened.

Susie awakened in the early dawn.
The stars still shone and the sun had
commenced to rise.

Now note how two students, both sophomores in the magnet school at San Fernando
High School, have evoked rather powerful descriptions of their own. Note particularly the
appearance of the absolute construction “Her body covered with a blanket,” in the first
and “her silk dress over her thin body and her briefcase in her small hands” in the second.
These are not constructions that sophomores ordinarily use for study in grammar
textbooks.
bits of wood to see whether anything to eat had been overlooked. Outside the brush house in the tuna clump, a covey of little birds chittered and flurried with their wings.

Kino’s eyes opened, and he looked first at the lightening square which was the door and then he looked at the hanging box where Coyotito slept. And last he turned his head to Juana, his wife, who lay beside him on the mat, her blue shawl over her nose and over her breasts and over the small of her back. Juana’s eyes were open too. Kino could never remember seeing them closed when he awakened. Her dark eyes made little reflected stars. She was looking at him as she was always looking at him when he awakened.

Kino awakened in the near dark. The stars still shone and the day had drawn only a pale wash of light in the lower sky to the east. The roosters had been crowing for some time, and the early pigs were already beginning their ceaseless turning of twigs and bits of wood to see whether anything to eat had been overlooked. Outside the brush house in the tuna clump, a covey of little birds chittered and flurried with their wings.

Steve awakened in the cold early morning. The street lights still shone and the moon had begun to fade away by the glistening shine of the tender sun. The dogs had been barking for some time, and the ice covered cars had already started their usual coughing sound before they were finally ready to engage in the never ending stream of traffic to the city. Outside the two-story brick house a waste-truck was parked and had begun to fulfill its weekly duty for that neighborhood.

Steve’s eyes opened, and he looked first at the glowing numbers on the panel which was the clock and then he looked at the new bamboo crib where Chris slept. And last he turned his head to JoAnn, his wife, who sat beside him in the bed, her silk dress over her thin body and her briefcase in her small hands. JoAnn’s
eyes were open too. Kino could never remember seeing them closed when he awakened. Her dark eyes made little reflected stars. She was looking at him as she was always looking at him when he awakened.

eyes were open too. Steve could never remember seeing her asleep or holding their baby when he awakened. Her busy lifestyle bothered Steve. She was always on the phone or getting ready for a business trip when he awakened.

In the composition assignment that followed the students had to go beyond the Steinbeck imitation in order to complete a short narrative of their own. In their compositions students used longer sentences and attempted more mature syntax than they usually attempted. “Wading around in someone else’s syntax” has benefits for these students in discovering that they can use resources in syntax of which they were unaware.

Let me conclude with a kind of responsive writing that you are familiar with and that is valuable.

It is an old procedure but it ought to be used more. Students need to look at problems associated with the dilemmas of our own time—the demands of the state, the limits of freedom, the purposes for which life is to be lived, one’s obligations toward others in society. These ideas are often clarified through imaginative entry into literature, where the ideas are presented in all of their complexity, where one can identify imaginatively first with one character and then with another, and where many of the decisions one makes are private rather than the bald, public decision-making that “Values Clarification” exercises call for. For example, one of these so-called “values clarification” exercises asks whether one would ever cheat a toll-gate operator. Much of the time the safest and most mature answer is “I don’t know.” Literature provides for a thoughtful, private weighing of values.

Literature is still the great resource, the great well from which we draw, as teachers and as students, for the life of the imagination.

The examples I am giving are from a senior composition class at Francis Polytechnic High School a number of years ago. The class was examining the limits of freedom. The class had read essays by Thoreau and Emerson and a poem, “Leap River, Toward Sky.” The poem indicated that a river needs banks and clear channels to achieve its goal. Students could see the banks as limits put on the river so that its resources, its life could be successfully channeled.

Here are two compositions from that class, attempting personal definitions of freedom. This time students are using their own personas and bringing in their own experiences.
Both writers are boys who were not A students in English. But their language has power and conviction.

The roots of freedom are in the mind. I had a friend who spent two years in a federal penitentiary. When he was finally released, he found that it is easier to free the body than to free the spirit because instead of being happy at being free, he relived everyday he spent in prison, hating the guards, hating the system, and hating the world that sent him there. Even after the bars were removed, there was still an invisible wall surrounding him. A prisoner without a cage is a very sad thing.

* * *

Freedom is something that can be achieved only when you are willing to accept it. So many people think they are not free, when in reality they are, but they are too confused in their life style, and too wrapped up in self-inflicted problems and anxieties to realize it. They are afraid to be free because freedom means giving up the things that they think give them security. They want a new car, a nice house, or a raise from their boss, but they are ready to kill if somebody puts a dent in their precious Cadillac, pull their hair out over whether they have enough money for the house payment, and kiss the ass of a boss they hate for a ten-cent an hour raise. Freedom means sacrifice, and the people who aren’t willing to pay the price have no right to complain.

Miles Myers of the Bay Area Writing Project talks about action research on the part of teachers. I think content analysis of student writing will yield new knowledge of the interaction between writer and student-reader-become-writer, who is often attempting a task very close to that of the writer himself or herself.

There are other relationships, of course, between literature and composition. I have described several that have attracted the attention of our Writing Project participants since the inception of the Project. We think our experience demonstrates again that literature is still the great resource, the great well from which we draw, as teachers and as students, for the life of the imagination. We tap it to help children and adolescents enter further into the vicarious experience literature offers. We tap it for the syntactic resources which writers present. Finally, we rely on literature for experiences and ideas on those matters of perpetual concern to us all, whether teachers or students. Literature points to values which every individual in every stage of life must clarify for himself or herself. Responsive writing points to what students make of the literary experience, to what parts of it they can identify as their own.

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