ENGLISH LITERATURE REVISITED:
MAKING IT REAL IN THE CLASSROOM
By Sarah Dame

Ten years ago I lived and breathed English literature. Any-
one who hinted at the etherealness of Wordsworth was met with
indignant pronouncements of his relevance to real life. I
could not imagine life after graduate school. However, lack
of funds finally wrenched me from my well-worn niche and thrust
me into a Special Education classroom peopled by nine boys,
ages nine to fourteen. This was my first clue that English
degrees were less than marketable, and the first chink in the
armour of my zealous devotion to English literature. The
clincher epiphany came one day when I was painstakingly
drilling my students on rhyming exercises. The verse read,
"For every shower, there is a _____." Wilson Taylor (name
changed to protect the innocent) completed that verse as
follows: "For every shower, there is a bathroom." That is
when I realized that these kids wanted real life stuff, not
rhymes. That was also the day I understood the withering and
somewhat appalled glance the principal gave me the day he came
into my room and saw titles such as "man's inhumanity to man"
written in my lesson plan book.

During the next ten years, I drifted from Special Education
to Vocational Education, put away the dissertation on Words-
worth I had planned to finish my first year of teaching,
stopped reading poetry, and began to glibly agree with skeptics
who said, "You can't do anything with English degrees," "English
is in the clouds," etc.

But. . .wait! Can there not be a marriage of Real Life
and Literature, and can this marriage not blossom in the class-
room? Yes, there can! The answer lies in making English
literature relevant to real life experiences, to the self-
actualization of human beings.

First, assume these premises: (1) There are creative
wells that can be tapped in each person which can enrich his
life and the lives of others. These wells may lie dormant
unless English literature draws them out and nurtures them.
Take, for example, my experience teaching writing to a class of
non-English majors, mostly accounting majors who had to take one
writing course in order to graduate. Once they overcame their
terrible Fear of Writing, wonderful things flowed from their
pens. And witness this verse from one of the nine boys men-
tioned earlier:

> The bird is so sad,
> I know she is
> Alone, to cry.
> Her husband is dead
> And she had no child.
> Oh, that was pitiful.
> I am so sorry
> You are alone, Mrs. Bird.
> I am, too.

(2) Literature is life. The images, characters and events in
literature come from real life experiences. Literature is a
dynamic experience shared by the writer and the audience,
through which the themes of modern existence--loneliness,
alienation, mutability, the search for identity--are communicated.
(3) There is an innerconnectedness among the modes of expres-
sion of these themes: drama, television programs, music, news
articles, poems, stories, advertisements, essays, paintings,
photographs, cartoons, art objects, current events. (4)
Literature helps the student deal with real life experiences.
It acquaints him with his own power and responsibility to con-
sciously create a set of personally meaningful values by
exposing him to the moral and ethical questions out of which
these values arise. (5) Literature contributes to the
maturing process of the human being as he moves from basic
survival needs to the ultimate goal of self-actualization. By
awakening awareness in the student, literature aids in the
process of becoming mature, in moving from dependence to
autonomy; from passivity to creativity; from self-centeredness

to awareness of others' needs; from a limited, subjective self-concept to an awareness of how one fits into the cosmic scheme; from an isolated view of events to an awareness of their inner-connectedness and relation to principles; from superficial to deep concerns; from imitation to originality.[1]

This is theory. How do we bridge the gap between theory and practice? How do we convince and inspire the unaware? How do we cut through years of seeing literature as irrelevant, even frightening?

First, the teacher. We need enthusiastic, aware, articulate teachers. We need zealots. We need inspired human beings. We need actors. Do you remember the difference between a class in high school where the teacher merely plodded through poems and plays, giving multiple choice tests, asking you to memorize lines, and a class where the teacher reached out, acting, finding, creating, relating?

Second, we need methods. Methods that connect words on a page, actors on a stage, to the stuff of life. We can bring home the relevance of literature by using a multi-media, multi-cultural approach to teaching it. By putting side by side the events, philosophy and culture of ancient history and con-temporary society, we demonstrate relevance and continuity. Does a rock song speak to man's ravaging of nature? So does "Nutting," a poem by Wordsworth. So do several of the Greek myths. So does a movie called "The Last Safari."

As an introduction to poetry, a media show combining slides, music, prose and poetry from ancient to modern times can be immeasurably valuable in the affective domain. Lines like "Time held me green and dying, though I sang in my chains like the sea," become real when students are looking at slides of childhood memories and listening to Simon and Garfunkle sing "Time it was, it was, a time it was. . .a time of innocence, a time of confidences; long ago, I know, I have a photograph; preserve your memories, they're all that's left you."

The resource chart in Figure 1 explores the issue of fantasy versus reality, using the same multi-media, multi-

cultural approach. Of course, the references cited are only a few of the wealth available.

In retrospect, I would once again leap to the defense of including "man's inhumanity to man" in a lesson plan for Special Education class. English literature is real, and it is our professional mission to make it real for our students.

Fantasy vs. Reality:
A Multi-Media, Multi-Cultural Approach

Time/Place	Mode	Theme
Ancient Greece	philosophy	Plato's cave
America, the South, Depression	Movie: "This Property is Condemned"	the consequences of fantasy
England, 1789	Poem: "The Crystal Cabinet"	the consequences of attaining a fantasy
England, 1709	Pastoral poems	the ideal "rustic"
Contemporary America	fashion; fashion ads	replicas of authentic attire
America, 1825	Painting: Sunday Morning	idealized landscape
America, 1970	Poem: "In Love With the Bears"	fairytale concept of people vs. how they really are
America, 1960	current events, essay: "In Dread of Knowing More" Barry Farrell	the Kennedy myth
Contemporary America	language	euphemisms

Figure 1

Time/Place	Mode	Theme
Contemporary	article: "Fantasy Merchants" (Newsweek, Dec. 3, 1979)	living out a fantasy
Contemporary America	Song: "Fountain of Sorrow" Jackson Browne	tradition of courtly love; illusion, disillusion
Contemporary America	soap operas	fantasy vs. reality
Contemporary	advertising	fantasy life styles, images
Universal	language	theory of communication
Contemporary America	personal anecdote	walking in the French Quarter: tourists vs. the real thing
Contemporary America	Movie: "WUSA"	fantasy vs. reality

Figure 1

Notes

[1]Knowles, Malcolm, "The Role and Mission of the Adult Educator," Chapter 2 in The Modern Practice of Adult Education, pp. 24-28.

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Errata:
        The article reviewing the work
of the licensure task force omitted Sr.
Jean Dummer, Associate Professor of
Education at the College of St. Catherine,
and mis-identified Richard Dillman;
Dillman is Assistant Professor of English,
St. Cloud State University.

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