

Ethnic Literature in the Secondary School Curriculum: The Classroom Activity Approach

by

Nicholas Karolides and Carole Gerster

It is generally understood that literary works by Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos should be part of the secondary school curriculum. Given the acceptance of this understanding, individual teachers are faced with three tasks: becoming conversant with and selecting appropriate literary works, integrating these works into courses of study, and using appropriate classroom methods. Our purpose is to concentrate on the last of these: to suggest creative ways of helping students to develop and enhance their personal responses to the text, and thus to understand better the histories, attitudes, customs, and current situations of ethnic minorities as presented from the perspective of ethnic minority writers.

The basic tenet of our approach is that we believe teachers should not teach *about* literature: they should, instead, help students empathize with various ethnic perspectives by engaging students *in* the texts. What a teacher tells students about a text is not the same as what students will learn if they place themselves inside the experiences of the characters. Traditional approaches that teach about literature are based on several assumptions: that the author's intention is the key to ascertaining what the work means and that this meaning can be identified; that historical circumstances control the author's intention; that the text's formal structures can be analyzed through close scrutiny to establish meaning. Furthermore, it is often assumed that there is but one meaning. In these approaches, the reader's role is neglected or omitted entirely. The literary-pedagogical basis for biographic, historical, and formal (genre) approaches is that such knowledge prepares or supports readers so that they can more adequately read and understand. Presumably, with such background knowledge they can understand what the author is saying and what the text is doing. Such visions are at times helpful; however, they tend to predispose or misdirect the specific reading, in effect denying the reader's perception of the text. Further, they can diminish the essential function of literature: portraying, enlivening human experiences for a reader. Our approach does not reject the relevance of biographical, historical, or formal considerations in the process of developing and enhancing insights to literature. The issue is when and how they should be introduced. Rather than making such studies ends in themselves, we believe they should be used to enhance and develop the reader's experience of the text.

Our approach is based in the transactional theory of literature. Often termed "reader response," this theory establishes that responses to litera-

ture depend on a reader interaction actively with a text to create an interpretation. This focus on the reader and the text grows out of an understanding of what happens during the process of reading; it recognizes how active readers are during this process, rather than assuming that they are passive spectators of the text. The central premise is that the literary work exists in the *transaction* between the reader and the text, that there is a dynamic relationship between reader and text, subject to variation among readers.

What influences a reader's responses to a text? What happens during the reading process? Each reader approaches a text with a particular frame of mind formed by her or his own personal milieu. Each reader—influenced by past experiences and current circumstances, ethnic and regional origins and upbringing, gender, age, past and present readings—will vary in her or his responses from those of others. Even readers of the same age, similar background, and circle of relationships will express differences in general impression and nuances of feeling. Considering the breadth of experiences among readers, the range of possible readings of a single text is potentially infinite.

The *reading event* initiates the literary experience, the first formulation of the literary work. This does not, of course, constitute an immediate flash of insight, of meaning, comparable to Athena emerging full grown from the head of Zeus. Readers make choices, both conscious and subconscious; the concept of "selective attention" operates. From the array of meanings and feelings that are conjured up, the reader selects those that seem appropriate. A dominant perception or purpose in the reader may activate or emphasize certain features over others. Close identification with characters or events may intensify the response. The created response is the realized experience of the reader.

Oral and written classroom activities—such as role playing, dramatizations, and situation expanding—can inspire personal involvement with characters and events to bring about thoughtful consciousness among the readers. With this classroom activity approach, class dialog starts where the student readers are (not where the teacher is), focusing on their initial reactions and understandings, and allowing them to reflect on those reactions and to interact with each other to understand the reasons behind their varying responses. Usually students will modify or expand their impressions. Generally, they will find commonalities among their responses to the text, even while their developing interpretations of the text will remain, at least in some measure, individualized.

The text is both springboard and resource for discussion. Biographical, historical, and structural information can be introduced in the discussions, as appropriate, as catalysts for deeper understandings or explanations to help students comprehend a feature of the text.

This reader-oriented process of building a response can help students to

develop their interpretative abilities. And by reflecting on their thinking, readers come to understand what triggered their own responses, how these affected their interpretations, and how their responses might be affected by the insights of others. Students begin to recognize the role of their backgrounds, beliefs, and personalities on the reading act. Teachers, focusing on the readers' experiences with the text, provide opportunities for them to identify and reflect on their reactions; invite them to compare reactions, to question themselves and others. Such classroom discourse promotes cross-fertilization of ideas among students. In an atmosphere of acceptance and honesty, students sense an appropriate, expressive reading or a limited or misdirected reading; they measure and receive the ideas of others, incorporating them in their own. Students revise and build their interpretation of the literary work, rather than merely note and organize the teacher's knowledge.

The process of exploring the evoked response is itself a learning experience. It cultivates a habit of mind that is provocatively thoughtful and democratic. The dynamics stimulate the expression and recognition of multiple viewpoints; they must be considered and reconsidered against each other, measured and tested against the text. And in considering reactions to the text, readers necessarily reconsider their own belief structures and ideas.

The classroom activity approach is particularly well suited to teaching ethnic literature. Teachers who feel uncomfortable about interpreting the experiences captured in literature of ethnic groups other than their own need not place themselves in a position of authority, as if in possession of the only "correct" interpretation. And, instead of being outsiders peering in, students assume the position of a character or characters in the text. This allows those outside the ethnic group they are reading about to become momentary insiders, and allows those inside the ethnic group to validate their own experiences.

We believe that carefully shaped classroom activities, oral and written, rather than lectures or question-and-answer discussion, are an important key to helping students discover what ethnic minority writers have to say about themselves, about relationships between themselves and others, and about survival strategies in an Anglo-dominated culture. We also believe that these classroom activities can help students discover for themselves what they need to learn about ethnic minority histories, traditions, customs, and attitudes—to fill gaps in their understanding.

The classroom activity approach to ethnic literature allows students to develop insights about their own experiences and about the experiences of others.

The practical counterpoint of the theory can be seen through several contrasting assignments and activities—those of the traditional teacher and those of the reader-response teacher.

A The traditional teacher asks students to write a composition about the ethical behavior of the protagonist. Here the tendency would be to impose the ethics of one's own ethnic group on the text. **The reader response teacher** asks students to write a letter to the main character about his or her ethical behavior from the protagonist's best friend or the protagonist's mother or father. Here students are asked to place themselves *inside* the ethnic community they are writing about.

B The traditional teacher asks students to write a composition describing the strengths and weaknesses of various characters in a story. This question assumes that strengths and weaknesses are universals and suggests that the teacher has the right answers. **The reader response teacher** asks students to assume the roles of various characters in a story and to have these characters discuss with one another their special problems, how they were met, and the consequences. Here students are asked to walk in the shoes of another and to read carefully to understand what those shoes look like and feel like.

C The traditional teacher gives a test on the crucial events in the two chapters of a novel read for homework. The crucial events are determined by the teacher and the test looks for the teacher's answers. **The reader response teacher** asks students to write a news story that might appear in the local newspaper depicting the crucial events. Here students are asked to imagine what the ethnic community would determine the crucial events to be.

We chose texts with several criteria in mind: (1) Ethnic authorship; students need to read these authors and to recognize them as authorities. (2) The stories are told from the perspective of a child or have a child as the protagonist, so that students can step into the shoes of a person from an ethnic group other than their own without also having to make a transition to adulthood. (3) The stories need to address an issue or event important to that ethnic community, so that students are helped to learn about history, traditions, customs, attitudes, and concerns generated from within the community itself. We believe several literary texts work particularly well with our approach: "The Snow Keeps Falling" is a short tale by Janet Campbell Hale that addresses the old and continuing problem of Native American deculturation; "Everyday Use" is a short story by Alice Walker that raises questions about the dual heritage of African Americans; *Farewell to Manzanar* is a novel by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston that recounts the World War Two Japanese relocation experience; and "Las Dos Hermanas" (The Two Sisters) is a short story by Rosalie Otero Peralta that records the conflict between Chicano traditions and the need for self-identify. Representative activities are illustrated below.

Classroom Activities for "The Snow Keeps Falling," by Janet Campbell Hale: (This story can be found in *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States* Ed. Dexter Fisher. Houghton Mifflin, 1980)

- A. Imagine and identify the document the Native American boy wants to ask a question about; then prepare the question. Write or role play the scene that follows, with members of the class--both Anglo and Indian—spontaneously taking roles.
- B. Write the interior monolog of the teacher and of the boy during the response to the question and immediately after.
- C. Write the interior monolog of Teresa Louis during this class period.
- D. Create a conversation between the father and son in which they discuss the son's continuing in school.
- E. Imagine that the teacher's car is stuck in the blizzard and that she is rescued by the boy and his father. She accompanies them to their home and stays for dinner. Role play the dinner conversation. OR Write the interior monolog of the three characters as they prepare and eat dinner. This may be a group activity.

Classroom Activities for "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker: (This story is frequently anthologized; it will appear in the Minnesota Humanities Commission anthology *Braided Lives: An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing*.)

- A. Dee (Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo) writes a letter to Maggie and her mother, inviting them to her wedding. Maggie decides to make Dee a quilt for her wedding. Describe the materials and pattern Maggie chooses for the quilt, as you write a conversation between Maggie and her mother. This may be a paired activity which may include writing the letter.
- B. Dee receives the quilt. Write a conversation between Dee and Asalamalakim, with Dee describing the quilt to him and the two of them deciding what they will use it for and why they will do so.

Classroom Activities for Farewell to Manzanar by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston:
(This is a novel by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston & James Houston. Bantam, 1974)

- A. Write the headlines and the first two paragraphs of the newspaper accounts of the removal as it would appear in a Japanese American newspaper.
- B. It is 1941. You are a member of a family that has been "rounded up" and is enroute to an internment camp (or you have just arrived). Having established your family role, enact a family conversation as you huddle in a train (or around a stove).

Classroom Activities for "Las Dos Hermanas" by Rosalie Otero Peralta:
(This story can be found in *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States* Ed. Dexter Fisher. Houghton Mifflin, 1980)

- A. Write the interior monolog of Margarita's thoughts as she chooses specific items for the embultorio she takes to her Aunt Marcelina in the hospital.
- B. Imagine Margarita trying to explain the meaning of the dream that haunts her (of "wide-brimmed red hats, huge cavernous mouths chewing tobacco, my aunt Marcelina and Teresina wrapped together in a black shawl in a field of snow") to her friends, and imagine her friends' responses. This may be a role-play activity.
- C. Continue Margarita's story in her own voice, as one of Uncle Flavio's sons asks her to go to the movies, and as she gives her response. D. Write (and roleplay) the conversation among Father O'Shaw, Aunt Marcelina, and Grandmother Teresina.