

UNDERSTANDING WHAT KIND OF LITERATURE ENGAGES STUDENTS

There are many ways to discover clues about that inter-attitudinal life that exists in all our students. For example, how do they dress? What kind of music do they listen to? I've already suggested a technique to survey their favorite films, but what about their favorite television shows? Is American Idol a favorite show? If so, what would this tell you about your students? Without falling into the trap of stereotyping or profiling, what is their ethnicity and could this give you hints as to their attitudes? If you had a majority of students who were *born* in Mexico, for example, how would they compare to a classroom of second and third generation Hispanic students *from* Mexico? What about their socioeconomic level? Are students from working class parents different in some way from students whose parents are all professionals? What about those who live in the city as compared with those who live in rural areas? When you prepare your lesson plan, you need to consider all of Rosenblatt's *innumerable possible variations* that will come into play in determining how you are going to *connect* to your students.

Exhausted already from the task facing you? You should be. Rosenblatt has written over 300 pages discussing the many diverse “preoccupations and interests” that readers bring to literature, and what the teacher has to consider in dealing with these concerns in teaching it.

Since I am writing primarily for the teacher in the public school classroom who is overworked and underpaid; who has little time in the day to do preparation, much less research the schemata of the students; who is taxed beyond belief by the necessity of administering useless and unnecessary standardized testing; who still, in most of the secondary schools, faces 30 to 40 eager, young, restless and creative minds while attempting to connect those young minds to literature; because this is the person to whom I am directing my observations, I have sought a technique that does not require a lifetime commitment to researching the backgrounds and experiences of students in order to engage them in literature.

What I have discovered in over twenty years of teaching is that, essentially, there are not much differences between ethnicities, social-economic levels, males and females or even age in what is *essential* and *important* in their lives. Please note that I have stressed the words, *essential* and *important*. Because we are indeed the “human” race, the only difference between the diverse groups I have taught over the years seems to be in those people at the extreme ends of normalcy who have experienced traumatic or life altering incidents that give them a slightly distorted schema from the norm.

There are many experiences that we all have in common—birth, growth, love, death. We can communicate because of a common core of experience, even though there may be infinite personal variations.
(Rosenblatt, 28)

The language that we use to attach meaning to our life experiences seems to be a problem if we don't speak the same language, but our experiences can be translated from one language to another. My favorite form of entertainment is viewing a foreign film. Of course, my enjoyment is greater when I have some familiarity with the language, which, in my case means Italian or Spanish, but that is not essential to my satisfaction. The characters in the film, foreign or otherwise, are searching for meaning in much the same way that I am, seeking the answer to those deep-seated philosophical questions of

Who am I? What do I want? Where am I going? They are reacting to conflicts in much the same way that I would. It is our common emotions as humans that seem to transcend all language.

I teach a favorite story in the style of the Directed Reading/Thinking Activity (DR/TA) called *Appointment With Love*, a short story that deals with a returning service man from Europe at the end of the Second World War. The man has been corresponding with a woman whose name he gained from the frontispiece of books that she donated to the Red Cross for distribution to service men overseas.

As some people did during this period, this young lady made notations in the margins of her books and the service man fell in love with her by reading these comments. After finding her address on one of the books, he began a correspondence with her, and they became very close, agreeing to meet in Times Square upon his return at the end of the war. She was to wear a rose for identification because she refused to send him a picture.

He was somewhat concerned about her refusing the picture, but was so taken by her personality that he decided to chance it.

As he waited for her to arrive wearing a rose, he saw a strikingly beautiful woman in a green dress, smiling and walking directly toward him, but she wasn't wearing a rose. As she got closer, the girl in the green dress smiled and said, "Going my way, soldier?" a notorious pickup line in those days.

Nervously, he felt he was split in two; he was pulled to follow the girl who made it clear that she was giving him a "come on" line and forget about meeting the woman who probably was very plain since she refused to send a picture. ("If your feeling for me has any reality and honest basis, what I look like won't matter," she wrote.) But he was so captivated by the personality revealed in her letters and notations on her books that he decided to let the girl in the green dress walk away and stayed to meet the woman he had been corresponding with.

In a few moments, he saw a woman wearing a rose off in the distance and his worst fear was realized: she was plain, overweight and older than he. But, instead of turning and running away, he stayed, remembering the many letters she had written him; they could be friends, he reasoned, as he stoically walked over to her.

He introduced himself and asked her to have dinner with him. The woman with the rose responded, "I don't know what this is all about, son. That young lady in the green suit, who just went by, she begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said that if you asked me to go out with you, I should tell you that she's waiting for you in that big restaurant across the street."

This story has never failed to engage my students. In the directed reading/thinking form in which I presented it, I interrupted the story from time to time and asked my students to make predictions and react to certain events. This story so engaged my

students that at the point where the girl's trick was revealed, they would collectively and loudly exclaim.

My students were as surprised as I the first time I read the story to them that they would become so caught up in a period of time in which they had little or no experience or interest. Why was this story so successful? If you were to place it in the diagram of the CIE on the preceding chapter, where would you place it? In the blue circle or outside the circle? Placing it in the circle means that you believe the story could engage the students on its own, without any preparation on your part to enlarge your students' experiences in the historical time period of the plot. In other words, it would answer the two important questions, "Does it make sense? (Does it fit within my experience?)" and "Does it have meaning? (Is it relevant to me?)" so that I can get to searching for answers to those very important life questions of who am I and where am I going.

Obviously, *Appointment with Love* could not stand-alone; it is outside the blue circle and you must recognize this before using it. There are many idiosyncrasies in the World War II historical period that would have to be explained to our students. For example, the comment of the girl when she said, "Going my way, soldier?" eventually became a cliché for a pickup line, but it did not carry much past the period so it is not in the vocabulary of our students. What did it mean when used during the war? How was it used? What kind of girl would say that to a soldier? There is intrigue in this line that would need to be explained to your students but only in their terms. You might begin by asking for current pickup lines. How do they contrast with lines like, "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" You might then show that some things never change. Lines like, "Don't I know you from somewhere?" or "Haven't we met before?" have

transcended the ages and are still being used in one form or another. You might record the most recent of pickup lines. These can be used when you teach the story in the future. You also need to explain the concept of the frontispiece in books (perhaps by showing examples). It is also important to examine the role that books and reading played in the lives of the people at that time, especially emphasizing the habit of readers to write comments in the margins to challenge or agree with the ideas of the author since this has such an important role in the story. The readers of that period looked upon this habit as an interactive form of responding to the author, much like a very primitive blog. The books were passed around and others read the text, so too, they read the comments in the margins and perhaps added their own.

Also, the perception that two people who have never met could fall in love by corresponding with each other via letters needs to be examined. In my classroom, many of my students (or their siblings) had experienced jail or some form of juvenile detention. The experience of writing to their girlfriends (boyfriends) while locked up can serve as a testimony to the seriousness that can quickly develop when writing letters. Also, the consequence that can develop from an e-mail encounter on the Internet is another example how writing seems to bring the emotions to the forefront.

Some time should also be spent on discussing the suggestion that the soldier would feel such loyalty to this woman that he would agree to meet her even though she was not attractive and a generation or two older. The major debate in the discussion among my students was whether the soldier should stay with Miss Maynell after he sees that she is plain or rush off and try to find the girl in the green dress that flirted with him. Before we see the decision the soldier makes, I ask the students to predict by writing the

ending to the story in the style of the writer. What would happen in the story after what the soldier said to the plain and overweight woman who carried the red rose? In the majority of cases, the students have the man running after the girl in the green, which, in the logic of the story, would have been the wrong choice to make. This, of course, makes for heated and spirited discussions and a final essay on the value system in the decision the soldier made.

What makes this story so interesting to my students? No matter the ethnicity or cultural background, the socioeconomic level, the kind of work that a person does or the language they speak, all human beings are very insecure about their appearance and are afraid that they will not be accepted for who they are inside, but rejected because they have a big nose, or small breasts (or large breasts), or a gap in their teeth or their ears stick out. With very attractive people, they sometimes worry that they will be accepted *only* for their appearance and not for their brains or the wonderful person they are. What this story deals with is just one of the highly interesting challenges that shape young people's lives. They will have to (or already have had to) make such a decision as the soldier had to make in the story. The decision they make indicates what kind of person they are: shallow and preoccupied with looks, or able to look beyond appearance for the whole person.

When the soldier stays with the woman he thought was Miss Maynell, regardless of the fact that she was plain, an older woman and overweight, he made the right decision and all my students recognized this even though they may have written their ending to say he dumped the woman and went after the girl in the green dress. When it turns out to be a test and the soldier passes, most readers, including those students who made the

wrong choice, feel good inside that the right action has been rewarded. This is a universal emotion that cuts across language and ethnicity.

If we as human beings fall within the range of normal, we struggle, regardless of age, against illness and death; we seek love and companionship; our lives revolve around the family unit, or lack thereof; we seek justice in all our dealings with each other; we seek out adventure either in life or in stories about others' lives; we try to live without encountering misfortune or adversity. These few but important values all human beings have held sacred since man first walked upright upon the earth. Birth, growth, love, death. (Rosenblatt, 28)

If you as a literature teacher confine your selection to the short stories, poems and novels that deal effectively with these *common human concerns*, with a little preparation, you should have no problems engaging your students with films or literature. In most cases, however, you will have to prepare your students by demonstrating how a story that takes place at the end of the second world war can be as vital to their lives as a story that takes place during the Iraq war on a similar theme: do we find love through physical beauty or from the beauty within the personality?

If we are able to find a similar story in a film that we can use to prepare our students for this *journey into our shared similarities*, our job will be that much simpler. As I have demonstrated, the power of the film is tremendous even while standing alone, so when the teacher is able to find the right plot in film, there is a greater chance of engaging our students with little or no preparation. What happens after the initial engagement, how the teacher uses this advantage offered by the film, is up to the teacher.

THE RHYTHM OF PROCESS

Northrop Frye in his classic work *Anatomy of Criticism* noted, “The fundamental form of process is cyclical movement, the alternation of success and decline, effort and repose, life and death, which is the rhythm of process.” I believe that the rhythm of process we discover in the seasons of the year is a good metaphor for what we find interesting in film and literature and can serve as a method of classifying those plots with the most power to engage our students.

Each of the seasons has a particular quality and function in the life cycle which can define and aid us in understanding the different universal story lines that seem to attract our students the most in our films and literature.

First let's look at *spring*, a time of year important to human survival because this is when our crops are planted in the earth. It is the beginning of the growing and nurturing season and thus it has become a symbol of the conception and beginning of life itself; next is *summer*, the warmest of our seasons, a time between the planting and harvest when everything is possible and the imagination is fanciful and free; then comes *fall*, the time of the harvest moon when we face the consequences of the success or failure of our planting. We are challenged with the hibernation or death of all growing things, a symbol of the degeneration of our own life as we age; and finally, *winter* arrives, the bitterest and harshest of seasons, when all lies fallow and little grows; a forceful symbol of our own death. But then, because of the “...alternation of success and decline, effort and repose, life and death...” The four seasons correspond wonderfully to what we as humans share: *Birth, growth, love, death...*

Winter becomes the first step toward regeneration as all dying things become the compost for all things living and the whole rhythm or process begins again as *spring* reborn. *Birth, growth, love, death...*

Even though most of us now live in urban areas, we can still feel an attachment to the changing seasons. If we look closely at the collective values we all share that I have outlined earlier, we can find four basic themes that, in one form or another, have occurred in story telling since the beginning of man's history. I believe these four are appropriately connected to the four seasons. There are many other plots, of course, but these four will give the teacher a start in the never-ending search for engaging films and literature.

The first and most important plot probably started as our pre-historic ancestors returned from their most important quest for survival, a dramatic search for food that the entire clan depended upon. It would seem logical that literature, in the form of story telling, began as the hunters sat around the fire on their return from the hunt and tried to relate the adventures that they had just endured to the others who remained behind in the caves.

At first, the hunters might describe their struggle by costuming themselves in the skins and horns of the animals they killed, playing the role of the attacking animals. (Pictographs have been discovered over the years that seem to verify this.) The bravest of the hunters might be honored as the hero of the hunt. He would stand alone before the fire, fighting off the attacks of the animals that the other hunters pantomimed in this silent show.

It is also likely that on many occasions the hero did not survive the hunt; in that case, the others probably honored him with some sort of ritualized performance, which might include chanting, or singing a song declaiming his bravery. It was only a few small steps from this primitive ritual celebrating the hero to the development of a chorus performing a dithyramb, to a leader stepping from the ranks to direct the chorus, to a performer evolving as the leader of the chorus to take on the persona of the fallen hero. With such a move, we see the point of attack receding further and further back in time to dramatize this fallen warrior who, in later story telling, takes on superhuman powers or god like qualities. (Stuart)

The key development to the actor emerging from the chorus is when the “celebrant unconsciously loses his own identity and begins to feel that he is the god or hero...” (Stuart, 1),

It is probable at this point that exaggeration enters the drama. By exaggerating the exploits of the hero, the first fiction is born in the story telling; the central character takes on super human and god-like characteristics in order to give the story more drama and increase interest. This is one of the reasons why the quest of the hero should be in the classification of the summer season.

From the primitive ritual celebrating the hero of the hunt to a fictional drama about the hero's *quest* is a short step in history. I'm sure it caught the interest of the first audience who huddled around the fire and it has been capturing our attention ever since. The plot belongs in the summer season and is called: *the hero's quest in romance and fantasy*. It is best represented by a season in which the imagination reigns supreme. Whenever you have stories about men and women who accomplish great feats that others

cannot, you have a built-in high interest. It might be mythological gods or fictional 007 agents. Both seem to hold our interest.

SUMMER—THE HERO'S QUEST IN ROMANCE AND FANTASY

Frye has chosen summer as the season to represent his mythos of romance. Perhaps this season was selected since it is the warmest and a time between planting and harvesting, a period of waiting for nature to work its magic; and a time that the imagination also works its magic, having occasion to romp and travel the world on great adventures of the mind, sometimes battling monsters and giant men. Frye notes that, "The romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream...where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the threat to their ascendancy." (Frye, 186)

The essential element of plot in romances is adventure, and that adventure usually involves a hero who embarks on a perilous journey called *the quest*. According to Frye, there are usually three basic stages to this quest: the perilous journey called the *conflict*; the *death-struggle*, the main battle in which the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the *discovery*, the recognition of the hero who has clearly proved himself a hero. (Frye, 187)

Joseph Campbell has further refined the hero's quest in his work. In a well-known quote from the introduction to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell wrote:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Campbell, 10)

The quest according to Campbell usually involves some sort of a *call to adventure*, in which the hero has to accept or decline; then the hero enters a testing period, a *road of trials* that challenges the hero who succeeds or fails; the hero is usually

successful, achieving the *goal or boon*, which often results in important self-knowledge; the hero is then challenged to *return to the ordinary world*, after deciding whether to return with or without the boon (usually with); the hero then gives the “boon” to the world which brings about great improvement. George Lucas’ deliberate use of Campbell’s breakdown of the myth of the hero in his *Star Wars* sagas has been well documented. The following is a breakdown of *Star Wars* based upon Campbell’s research.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE HERO’S QUEST FOUND IN STAR WARS

(Based upon Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*)

1. THE HERO’S WORLD

This is the world the hero inhabits when we first meet him or her. It is usually mundane and routine.

You first meet Luke Skywalker, hero of Star Wars, toiling in his day to day routine on the farm working for his uncle.

2. THE CALL TO THE QUEST

The problem, challenge or call to action is presented. The first response is to refuse the call.

The robot is discovered with Princess Leia’s desperate holographic message to Obi Wan Kenobi, who then asks for Luke to answer the call.

3. THE REFUSAL OR RELUCTANCE TO UNDERTAKE THE QUEST

At this point the hero often refuses the call or expresses a reluctance to undertake the adventure.

Luke refuses Obi Wan’s Call to save Princess Leia and returns to his aunt and uncle’s farmhouse, only to find the Emperor’s storm troopers have killed them and destroyed the farm. Luke is now eager to undertake the quest. His first response is to undertake the call to adventure for revenge.

4. ACCEPTING THE QUEST—PREPARATION FOR THE ROAD OF TRIALS

The hero usually has a mentor that prepares him/her to enter the special world where the adventure will take place.

Obi Wan Kenobi is that character in Star Wars. He gives Luke his father’s light saber to use in battle.

5. BEGINNING THE QUEST

At last the hero enters the special world where there is no turning back. The adventure begins.

The spaceship takes off leaving the ordinary world.

6. THE ROAD OF TRIALS

The hero is further tested, gains allies and makes enemies. The rules of the special world are defined for her/him.

Han Solo becomes an ally; Luke gets a hint of what the special world is like from his adventures at the Cantina.

7. THE DEATH-STRUGGLE

The hero comes face to face with fear and death and faces the challenge that will define success or failure. The hero does not always survive this struggle.

In the giant trash masher on the Death Star when Luke is pulled under by the tentacled monster, he is held under the sewage long enough that we begin to believe that he is dead.

8. GAINING THE BOON OR GOAL

The hero achieves the goal, finding the boon or benefits; that usually results in a self-knowledge or an understanding that helps save the world.

Luke rescues Princess Leia and defeats Darth Vader by capturing the plans of the Death Star.

9. RETURN TO THE ORDINARY WORLD

The hero begins the return to the ordinary world with the boon. This is usually very difficult and sometimes the hero dies but is resurrected by the knowledge of the boon or some other miracle. Sometimes a mentor saves him/her. It is a difficult journey and struggle.

Darth Vader vigorously pursues Luke and Leia as they escape the Death Star. Luke is almost killed and appears miraculously to survive. His defeat of Darth Vader brings peace to the galaxy.

Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* has defined Campbell's hero's journey in a book with much greater detail than I have attempted here. I have simplified the hero's journey to what I believe is the essence of the plot so that students can easily recognize the quest in a modern film or story. Anything that has survived for thousands of years as this plot has is certain to have something valuable working for it that will engage our students. Having students identify the hero's quest in modern films and literature is a worthwhile project.

The romance, in works like the hero's quest, attempts to soften our concept of reality so that when we dream the impossible or the fanciful dream, it is realized, it happens, unlike realism where the dream might turn dark and ugly. Our audiences say at the end of the experience, "I realize that this could never happen, but I wish it could!" It is not so much that the audiences of romance believe in magic or the supernatural or in a

world of galaxies far, far, away; it is that the ideals of the heroes of these adventures are projections of their own hopes and desires.

Frye has noted, "...in every age, the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance." The most popular of the romances, then, are the ones that accurately reflect the standards of the social and intellectual classes in the principles and standards of its heroes. As the standards change, however, as we observed in the sixties and seventies, so do the heroes of romances.

Clint Eastwood was highly successful in films with his *Dirty Harry series* because he was able to tap into the values of the majority of people who viewed the film: the audience had a great need for *order over law* in taming the excesses of the sixties and early seventies. Only a decade earlier, Eastwood had been successful with western romances about the *man with no name*, films that exploited the freedom and lawlessness of the anti-hero. Once the button down generation of the fifties loosened its collar, as a matter of fact, they discarded the collar altogether, and the anti-hero came into vogue.

As long as the hero on *the quest* reflects the values of the majority of society it plays to, it will be successful in engaging its audience. It perhaps won't win recognition from critics or win literary prizes, but it will engage audiences, especially those who agree with the hero's values.

This might explain why the hard-hitting romances of TV and film that depict a violent, uncaring world featuring a violent, but caring anti-hero is so popular with my students. They see characters from their world representing their own wish fulfillment dreams as the anti-hero. These heroes are flawed like them and the adventures are unlike

anything any other generation experienced, but it is very much true to the inner city vision of what life is like and the values such a hero would hold in that world.

With those students who come from an affluent life style environment, aside from the hip-hop or rap influence of music, they perhaps admire these romantic anti-heroes as projections of their own need to reject their family's culture and assert a new one, a *wanna be* need to belong to something shocking and dangerous. That certainly could explain how many fashion trends tend to emanate from inner city neighborhoods and so quickly embraced in affluent areas.

When reading or viewing literature that was written in an earlier historical period, we should make an effort to teach our students about the society of the people featured *in* the drama. We usually make the effort to teach about the author of the drama or story and the times in which he/she lived, but we also have to teach the schemata of those *in* the drama as well.

What was normal to the audience of a Molière or Shakespearean play may not be common to an audience in our modern period. A struggle by father and son over the same young woman, for example, has been featured in both authors' plays; it was quite a common plot device, as a matter of fact, with a direct line that can be traced from the earliest Roman comedies of Aristophanes and others.

A father and son competing for the same woman in Molière's day led to great comedy and irony. If the boy got the girl, however, it meant that the society was upside down; the father's world was rejected which forced the young couple to go off and start a new society in their own *green world* where new values could exist.

In these comedies, however, the girl's marriageable ages were 12-14 (Juliet from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was only 12 year old). Today, fathers competing with their sons for his 12 year old girl friend would not be very funny. There have been times in our past when we have looked at older men with young girls in a different way, (the novel and film of *Lolita*, is the best example), but never with the same abandonment as the earlier French comedies of manners.

The son's rebellion against the father is universal in almost all comedies, found in every language and in every historical period. How it is specifically handled varies somewhat from generation to generation. If the society's values are strongly respected by the people, the father, who represents the status quo of his generation, most likely will succeed in gaining the girl and ostracizing the upstart son.

If it is a time of change, the son will likely prevail because he represents the values of an emerging society as he drives out the antiquated standards of the father (sometimes the father sees the light, is converted to the new society and invited to the feast that usually ends these comedies).

We must remember, however, that the universal, human qualities that transcend language and culture are found in almost every period of history, regardless of how the plot plays out in the continuing swing of the pendulum from the reactionary to the revolutionary. The teacher can increase the degree of the engagement of students by being able to compare or contrast the behavior of the audience and the people in the drama with our modern (but not so different) audience and people who view the drama. What results from such a comparison/contrast is a deeper and more lasting engagement,

resulting from the addition of a very enriching icing to the cake of typical human behavior.

One way to emphasize the shared values to our modern audiences is for the teacher to highlight at every opportunity any similarities between modern and ancient audiences that reach into the schemata of our students, especially those characteristics that can create the *ah ha!* of an epiphany.

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, our modern students might find it strange for a group of young adults to just hang around Verona with very little to do but get into sword and knife fights with another group of young adults, which in this play results in the death of Romeo's companion, an important step of inciting the incident that leads to the consequences that keep Romeo from Juliet. These bored young men did, after all, belong to a very powerful noble's households and were available to serve the noble when commanded.

My students could easily relate to the groups of unruly youths of Verona when I pointed out to them that much of *their* time is spent hanging around the neighborhood with little to do but getting into brawls with other young people who hang around the neighborhood with little to do. Today we call such behavior *gangbanging*. My students recognized these young people of Verona as a gang and found common ground regardless of what they were called.

Again, the success of engaging students in a Shakespearean story is finding a way to demonstrate that this featured story will do much to answer the essential questions that all young people want answered: *Who am I? What do I want? Where am I going?* Our students want to be assured that viewing a film or reading a play about two young lovers

who die is not going to waste their time and energy (it must be relevant and important to them) and is attempting to help them discover the answer to these important essential questions.

When a modern director creates a film about a specific historical period, it is not as important for the teacher to focus on the schemata or values of the people in that period in order for the film to engage students. In many cases, the director will infuse the film with the values of our modern society. As an example, the romantic film *Braveheart* chooses as its theme the concept of freedom. It was a driving force in the hero's life; a modern concept of man having certain inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and yet, the concept of freedom as we know it today was not conceived until the eighteenth century, many, many years after the historical time period of this film. It didn't matter in this case. The modern artists who created the film used modern concepts to develop their theme, and, as a result, the film holds a great deal of interest to young student viewers. It is also violent and physical, two attributes of our modern society that create a high interest curve for our students.

As part of the extending phase of the CIE in connecting, involving and extending students into literature, the teacher could choose to discuss how the film would have looked had it been produced (staged) in the actual historical period.

Sometimes the hero dies in romances. But when this happens, the plot moves to a new classification found in the season that follows romance's summer of imagination and fantasy. Death doesn't seem to have a comfortable place in romance; and so, a new classification is needed. This second classification of engaging plots I call, *Tragedy and the Hero*. It usually involves some form of tragedy in which a hero (the kind of hero

changes through the changing values of each society), through a flaw in personality, comes to a tragic end. The classification is represented by autumn, the season where the land becomes fallow after the harvest. The fruit has been picked and most growing plants die or hibernate, and we are warned by a change in the weather that winter, with the bitterest of weather, is just around the corner.

AUTUMN—TRAGEDY AND THE HERO

In this form, the plot does not end happily, but it does end equitably, as determined by the degree of the hubris and arrogance of the hero. This is a case where the audience says, “This is how it should end because of what he (she) did, but I am sorry it happened because I’m afraid to could happen to me.” Tragedy works effectively because we see ourselves in the character of the hero and through the opposing forces of pity and fear are engaged: we feel sorry for the hero and fear that such a thing could happen to us. A modern film that best illustrates this form is one in which the hero is caught up in a force that he/she can’t seem to control; a force that drives the hero to unlimited power until that power eventually corrupts. One of the most popular films for my students in this category is *Scarface*, the recent version that starred Al Pacino. It deals with a criminal as the hero and is illustrative of how our concept of hero has changed since the Greeks; we have gone far past the tragedy of the common man in our modern world, as best illustrated by Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. We are no longer limited to the Greek’s aristocracy or even Miller’s the common man. Now the criminal can serve as a hero and role model, especially among students who live everyday in the reality of a world of such flawed people. In such a world, only the mistake of a wrong choice turns the hero into the anti-hero.

We observe Scarface as he begins a thrilling climb to the top of the ladder of success in the drug trade to, through a flaw in his character, a terrible downfall. Another modern film on a similar story is *Carlito's Way*, the story of a shady but admirable man who tried to stay clean but was drawn into a crime by loyalty to a friend. Both films starred Al Pacino, an actor who seems to have a penchant for this kind of film. The films that seem to illustrate this classification best are the wonderful *film noirs* that began in the forties and emerge in different forms today.

As we progress from autumn to the bitterest of seasons, winter, our next classification takes form. I call it *Realism, Irony and Satire*. Winter best represents this category. It is, like its season, in direct opposition to summer's romance. As Don Quixote protested, no one in a romance ever asks who pays for the hero's accommodation. In realism, we seem to want to make sure that somebody pays.

WINTER—REALISM, IRONY AND SATIRE

This classification is best approached as the opposite of romance, almost a parody of the romantic point of view. Romance has adventures and fantasy; realism has life that is real and this genre has been used over the centuries to explain the unexplainable, the "steady unbroken turning of the wheel of fate or fortune." It sometimes looks at human life as an unrelieved bondage that only has an end in death; sometimes the characters are seen as "all too human, warts, flaws and all." If we look at this genre on a continuum from Irony to Satire, when we begin to move into the phase of satire (we must have something to make fun of or we will go crazy), we begin to enter a high degree of the ridiculous. Our audiences leave the presentations of realism by saying, "That is so true to life! Now I want to kill myself."

A film that immediately comes to mind that would fit in this category is *Dead Man Walking*, an excellent film that takes the romance of the Clint Eastwood prison films and turns it upside down. This “hero” (and again I use that term advisedly because in the beginning we are not sure he is guilty) does not pull a daring escape and is not saved at the last minute via Eastwood. It is brutal and hard to watch but, at the end, serves its purpose by making its audience reevaluate their positions on capital punishment.

Taking into account my students’ exposure to the drug culture, most of the realistic films attractive to them involve that culture. One is called *Requiem for a Dream* and the other is *Trainspotting*, a British import. Both are extremely hard-hitting and difficult to view, but both are superb examples of this kind of realism: films in which irony plays an important role in commenting on the real, almost naturalistic events that take place before the camera.

The fourth classification of engaging plots falls under the season of spring and is called: *coming of age*, the most common plot being when man (woman) wants woman (man) (Or any combination thereof). This is mostly in the form of comedy and represents the season of rebirth and regeneration, a season directly opposite to autumn’s fall and tragedy.

SPRING—COMING OF AGE

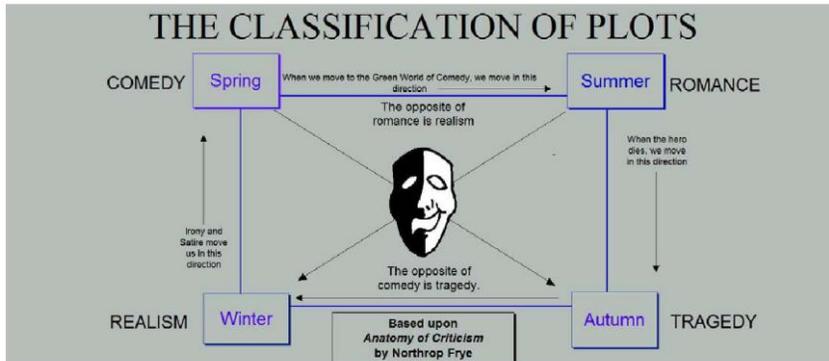
The most common form of this category is the coming of age drama in which a young person grows or matures into man or womanhood during the length of the story. It usually involves a young man who desires a young woman and something or someone stands in the way, effectively serving as a block, preventing the young man from

obtaining the girl and thereby serving as the conflict. This is usually a parent because the blocking characters usually represent the dominant society of the period and have to be overthrown, along with the creation of a new society where a new world (in the classic sense, a “green” world of comedy) is created and the young couple lives happily ever after.

As I’ve discussed earlier, in the comedies of the Romans and French, the blocking character is usually the father. Both father and son competed for the same girl. What is important to this genre is that a new society is formed and sometimes even the blocking characters are welcomed into it so that everyone lives happily ever after. The audience leaves the experience, saying, “I feel good because life should always end this way.” Spring is, after all, the most positive of the seasons.

A modern example of this form of classification is a quite silly, but highly popular, film titled *The Wedding Crashers*, where two young men crash weddings by pretending to be relatives for the purpose of seducing women and engaging in the green world’s wedding feast. In this comedy, unlike its origins in Greek New Comedy, the young men are themselves the imposters or alazons in the classification of irony.

Instead of overthrowing the society of those who stage the weddings (assuming the role of Ironist), as would occur in an 18th century comedy, the young men slowly reject their own superficial values and embrace the values of the society represented by the wedding givers (beginning as imposters). What this film presents is a very good opportunity to compare and contrast Greek and Roman comedy with modern comedy as illustrated by this film.



The four classifications I have outlined represent the opposing forces in nature: The basic opposition to summer is winter, just as romance opposes realism; comedy becomes an extension of romance and is in opposition to tragedy that is an extension of realism. If we can recognize what has made these genres so interesting for audiences for thousands of year, we then have the secret to selecting the literature that we can use to engage our students.

We can find many examples in modern films that share the characteristics of these genres. When we do, these films make an excellent platform for the adventure of progressing from modern literature represented by the film to ancient literature, represented by plays and the novel, from our past.

The stories are basically the same. Some details may have to be explained, but, as an example, all young men have sought love no matter what period they lived in history. The basic emotions that they experienced are similar. They may have dressed differently; the way they spoke to each other might have been different; but like all young men in love, they made fools of themselves and worried whether they were going to be rejected. Regardless of how sophisticated our modern students may appear to be, at heart they are

young people struggling against the same forces that young people struggled against in Shakespeare or Molière's time. Language and customs may change slightly, but at the root is the same human desire, to find love.

SUMMARY

Why have I chosen to classify literature into the seasonal rhythms of spring, summer, fall and winter? What is the advantage to the teacher of such a classification?

If we examine the emotions that seem to bond to the different seasons, perhaps we can understand why certain types of plots can create a strong connection to our students. Life and living are all about rhythms similar to the rhythms of nature. The cyclical symbols of life are usually divided into four main phases corresponding to the four seasons of the year, like four periods of the day: morning, noon, evening, night; four periods of life: youth, maturity, age, death; four aspects of the water cycle: rain, rivers, sea or snow; and so on.

Our seasons impact us in many different ways. In winter we are faced with the death of nature and our lack of food; the serious nature of winter is something we cannot ignore no matter how much we try. Our sun remains low in the sky and in most areas, permits bitter weather. Many pagan societies built huge temples to the sun to try to get it to move higher in the sky, attempting to abolish the scourge of winter forever. Many of us moved to Southern California or Florida for the same reason.

In literature, realism best fits the classification of winter as we experience heroes that are much like us, warts, flaws and all (or, as we find in satire, humans metaphorically even lower in the sky (and us) than the sun). With stories that deal with the shortcomings of human beings, why not allow the bitterest of the seasons—winter to represent it?

We become joyous in the elation of the rebirth and revitalization of spring (You would agree unequivocally if you could see a typical spring day on the quad at the University of Illinois), but before the coming of spring, we have to experience the negative emotion of winter. Comedy best fits with spring as we watch the rebirth of the hero in all his or her innocence, and, after many comic struggles, prevail over adversaries and move into the green world to live happily ever after.

Then summer follows, where the warm weather heats up our imaginations and we indulge in the literature of romance that carries our hero out the other side of the green world into god-like, super heroic accomplishments.

Eventually, our hero reminds us that we are all human and enters the season of autumn, a time of the decline and fall of all growing things, as well as a decline and fall of our hero; we have entered the literature of tragedy, a study of a human being's flaws carried to the tragic level, resulting in our pity and fear.

The genres of autumn's tragedy and winter's realism, irony or satire are just as strong a need as our desire for spring's rebirth and summer's romance. Of course we need spring's coming of age stories, or summer's romantic episodes to ease the bitterness and fall of our tragic heroes. But occasionally we have a strong need for the tragic and bitter life and death struggle of the realistic literature represented by winter.

It is a need just as strong as our willingness to allow ourselves to be transported into a hero's romantic adventures while knowing that such an adventure could never take place. It serves as an antidote to the bitter dose that comes from following our hero's decline and fall in tragedy. We understand that this is more than likely the outcome of our own struggles in life.

We learn from all four of our seasons; and each season's literature is needed just as strongly as each natural season of the year. We know there is a purpose in the literature of our stages of life just as there is a purpose in the natural rhythms of our four seasons of nature.

Once we can classify a film or piece of literature into its season, we must next determine the strength of its place in the seasonal classification. In other words, how strongly does it fall into the coming of age of spring or in the tragic necessity of fall? The stronger each piece of literature falls into the natural rhythms of this classification, the stronger the likelihood for a film or literature to engage our students. These seasonal classifications simply serve as a means of determining what films or literature are more likely to connect to our student's schemata. It is that simple and yet that complex.

ENGAGING FILMS THAT FALL INTO THE FOLLOWING SEASONAL CATEGORIES

SUMMER—**Romance: The Hero's Quest**

True Romance

The Star War chronicles

Star Trek

Groundhog Day

Braveheart

Gladiator

Matrix Chronicles

Silence of the Lambs

LA Confidential

Hurricane

WINTER—**Realism, Irony and Satire: The Hero as One of Us**

Requiem for a Dream

Trainspotting

American Beauty

Ciderhouse

Traffic

Taxi Driver

Unforgiven

El Norte

Dead Man Walking
 FALL—**Tragedy: The Fall of the Hero**
 Scarface
 The Godfather Trilogy
 Romeo and Juliet
 American History X
 Cool Hand Luke
 A Simple Plan
 SPRING—**Comedy: The Hero's Coming of Age**
 American Graffiti
 A Bronx Tale
 The Last Seduction
 My Family/mi familia
 Casablanca
 Shakespeare in Love
 Romeo and Juliet
 Saturday Night Fever
 Say Anything
 Something Wild
 Titanic
 Tootsie
 When Harry Met Sally

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrew, J. Dudley, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*, London: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Aronowitz, Stanley. "Working-Class Identity and Celluloid Fantasies in the Electronic Age." *Popular Culture, Schooling, and Everyday Life*. Ed. Henry A. Giroux and Roger I. Simon. Granby: Bergin, 1989. 197-217.
- Brinton, Donna M., and Holten, Christine, Into, Through and Beyond A framework to develop content based Material by The California Literature Project (Brinton, Goodwin and Ranks, 1994), Forum, vol 35 number 4, October to December, 1997, page 10.**
- Calendrillo, Linda T., Fleckenstein, Kristie S., Worley, Demetrice A., *Language and Image in the Reading-Writing Classroom: Teaching Vision*, 2002, p. 4-5.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949. p. 30
- Evans, Richard I., *Dialogue with Erik Erikson*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- Fabe, Marilyn, *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.
- Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Atheneum, New York: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- Jarvie, Ian, *Philosophy of the Film: Epistemology, Ontology, Aesthetics*, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.
- Gardner, Howard, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, New York: Basic Books. Place of Publication, 1993.

- Gardner, Howard, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*. New York: Basic Books. Place of Publication, 1999.
- Gardner, Howard, *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice*, New York: Basic Books. Place of Publication, 1993.
- Giroux, Henry A., and Roger I. Simon. "Popular culture as a Pedagogy of Pleasure and Meaning." *Popular Culture, Schooling, and Everyday Life*. Ed. Henry A. Giroux and Roger I. Simon. Granby: Bergin, 1989. 1-29
- Karolides, Nicholas J., *Reader Responses at the Movies: Reader Response in College and Secondary Classrooms*, page 79
- Kozloff, Sarah, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*. Berkeley, CA., University of California Press, 2000.
- Metz, Christian. *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. Trans. Michael Taylor. New York: Oxford UP, 1974.
- Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film: The World of Movies, Media, and Multimedia*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Phillips, Lori, EdD, *Look and See: Using the Visual Environment as Access to Literacy*, page 2
- Rosenblatt, Louise M., *Literature as Exploration*, New York: The Modern Language Association, 1983.
- Sapir Edward. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. New York: Harcourt, 1921.
- Sousa, David A., *How the Brain Learns*, Reston, VA: 1995.
- Stiefenhofers, Helmut. "Schemata and Networks—The Building Blocks of Cognition." 27 Aug. 2003 http://www.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/diglib/stiefenhofer/seminare_lili/cog_psy/schemata.html.
- Storing, Herbert J., *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962. Stuart, Donald Clive, *The Development of Dramatic Art*, New York: Dover Publication, Inc. 1960
- Stokes, Suzanne, *Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Literature Perspective*, page 1
- Suhor, Charles. *Report on Trends and Issues*. Urbana: NCTE, 1991.
- Teasley, Alan B., and Ann Wilder. *Reel Conversations: Reading Films with Young Adults*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1997.
- Vogler, Christopher, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*, Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1992.
- Winkler, Martin M., *Classical Myths and Culture in the Cinema*, London: Oxford University Press, 2001, p.7
- Winkler, Martin M., *Classical Myth & Culture in the Cinema*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.