

Literature as Art: Providing the Missing Link

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INTRODUCTION

Objective

My students love art, whether or not they realize that it is art. I use this as the starting point for my curriculum unit. Most young people – actually, most people in general, I would venture to say – love at least one type of artistic form. “I need to express myself” is the rallying cry of teenagers when defending anything from piercings to music with explicit lyrics. The goal of my unit, then, is to link their understanding of the art forms that they know and enjoy, and the art form of literature that they never recognize as such and have convinced themselves they will never enjoy.

Most students seem to read novels with a focus on trying to figure out what is happening, or in other words, the basic plot developments, so that they can pass the quiz that comes at the end of each chapter. In the meantime, my goal as a teacher is to get them to see beyond that and recognize the art of literature or the *way* in which it is told. If one looks for hard facts, one turns to the newspaper, but if one looks for beauty and larger truths, one looks to literature. In *The Romantic Movement* by Alain de Botton, the narrator describes the difference between information and art in the following way: “If Cyril Connolly defined journalism as that which would be considered only once, literature as that which would be looked at again, then Campbell’s cans were *journalistic* [mere disposable receptacles for carrying liquid] until Warhol’s framing operation made them *literary* [something to hang on walls for repeated view]” (1). Using this metaphor, I do not want my students to make the common mistake of seeing literature as some type of “journalistic” endeavor, as something that is meant only to convey certain types of information. Rather, I would like my students to see the “literary” and enduring qualities of literature and its greater importance.

Purpose

In the end, my purpose is not necessarily to make students fall in love with literature, though that would be an extremely welcome byproduct. Instead, my purpose is to empower students with an understanding of the purpose of literature and to challenge them to make connections between literature and their lives, their interests, and their own forms of expression. This idea of having students make connections between their lives and literature is not a revolutionary idea. It is even a Houston Independent School District (HISD) English standard. However, my students are not accustomed to making the mental leaps required to make connections to works that do not have an obvious or simple tie to their lives. If the novel does not have a teenager facing situations similar to

their own, they are quick to claim, “I can’t relate to this,” as if it were an acceptable excuse. Students *can* make connections to texts from other time periods about situations very different than their own because in the end, all writers focus on the human condition. We just have to challenge our students continually to do so and help them along the way. The bottom line, then, is to *engage* my students in the process of reading and critiquing literature and helping them develop their critical thinking skills. If my students gain exposure to and understanding of the fine arts along the way that they otherwise would not have gotten, I would also be quite content.

Background

This unit is written with my students and their particular needs and interests in mind. Thus, it seems only fair that I should explain the situation in which I plan to teach it. My curriculum unit is intended for my Pre-Advanced Placement (Pre-AP) English II class, though it can be modified for different grade levels. The term “Pre-AP” at my school – and, I hear, at many other schools – means very little. My students’ abilities range from transitional ESL level to true AP level and everything in-between. Our school is a Title I school, so despite good intentions, there are limited resources at the school and in most of the students’ homes.

The overall attitude of the students toward school is apathetic at best and resentful at worst. It is hard to blame them when they relate years of worksheets, movies without instructional purpose, and continual TAAS preparation. At the high school level, most of them have resigned themselves to the idea that English (which they see as merely reading and writing) is a hopelessly boring subject that seems to have been randomly designated a high school graduation requirement, as to them it is useless. While of course I have some students who have a love of literature, who have homes conducive to reading, and who are extremely interested in the subject, this is the overall attitude with which most of my students enter my classroom.

Beneath the ingrained negative attitude, though, lie hidden curiosities and interests. I’ve found that with a little bit of prodding my students are very good at analyzing information. They have the capacity to understand different points of view. They are extremely creative and love sharing this creativity. The problem is that they are so rarely given a chance to show their creativity and capability for true insight. As a result, they seem to think that creativity has no place in the classroom. They see learning as a passive process of receiving useless information. The trick is to switch this creativity back to the “on” position, or to re-establish the link between this creativity and schoolwork. With this as my starting point, I am both overwhelmed and energized by the prospect of teaching literature. It affords me the opportunity to spark in my students an interest in literature and an opportunity to “start from scratch,” so to speak, in giving them an understanding of its purpose and use.

OVERVIEW

There are several subtopics that I will address throughout the unit as a way to get to the exploration of art as literature. There are three questions, outlined below, that we will explore throughout the unit as a way to organize our study. 1) What is art? 2) What do different types of art have in common? And 3) Does art matter? What is its purpose?

What Is Art?

This is the fundamental question at the center of the unit. As a means to explore the question, I will bring in examples of as many different forms of art, from the established to the extreme, as possible. We might even tackle the concept of “new” art which involves technology since many of my students are quite interested and adept at it. I would like students to fumble through the process of attempting to put into words an extremely hard idea to verbalize. Students will come up with their own definitions before we look to the “experts” for their explanations. This is the topic that will begin the unit, but as a class we will continue to revisit it and make amendments to our definition of it throughout the unit. Students will also reflect on their own relationships to art. We will discuss what makes an art piece good, what kind of art they like, what kind of art they do not like, and other related topics. During the early stages of this discussion, I will not bring up the idea of literature unless one of the students does so. Not until we have come up with a cursory definition of art will I challenge the students to make connections between literature and other types of art.

One work that is extremely helpful in informing my own understanding of different art forms and their perceived validity is *But is it Art?* by Cynthia Freeland. Freeland’s book is an amazing collection of philosophy, art theory, and helpful concrete examples. She synthesizes a great deal of information in prose that is quite easy to follow. She guides the reader through many of the controversies of contemporary art while providing the theoretical background that acts as a lens through which we can view this art. We can also find a very adept explanation of the role of aesthetics, beauty, new media, gender, and politics in contemporary art. Another powerful book is John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*. While the book is a bit older, it has some wonderful information. I find the section on the packaging of art (i.e. galleries, museums, or less formal settings) fascinating and also helpful in understanding our preconceptions about the worth and meaning of art pieces.

What Do Different Types of Art Have in Common?

The natural question that will come out of this process and to which I will direct my student once our first definition of art is established is the following: Does literature “count” as art? We will examine the parallels between the different art forms that they know and the art form of literature, which seems an uninteresting mystery to most of them. How does literature do what a painting, dance, movie, rap song, or television

program does? The question about how literature can do what a film does will lead us to explore and compare the imagery in novels to the imagery in visual arts. The question about how literature can do what music does will lead us to the effect of sound description in narrative. We will use such questions to explore the *art* of literature. Students usually see literature, and indeed all written texts, simply as sources of information. Therefore, if the “information” contained is not necessarily useful (e.g. a description of the weather) it is quickly discarded or ignored. Students do not take this stance, however, when it comes to a movie or a song. It is seen as entertaining, and thus worthwhile.

Thus, it would be useful to make the parallels between different types of art clearer and more tangible for the students. We’ll discuss the advantages of using different art forms in different situations as well. We’ll compare a song, a picture, a newspaper article, an artistic rendition, and a literary rendition of a historical event (possibly the Vietnam War or the Los Angeles Riot of 1992) to see the different ways that they portray the same event. We’ll then discuss whether or not we think one of the forms captures the event in a more interesting way. This activity will also provide an opportunity to discuss the connection between art and truth. just because a piece of literature takes a certain historical event as its topic, does that mean that the piece delivers a window into what actually happens or is it completely subjective?

An amazing text that will be central to our discussion of the “art” of literature is *Martín & Meditations on the South Valley* by Jimmy Santiago Baca. This text contains two approximately fifty page narrative poems (divided into many shorter poems) that use language that is extremely vivid. The content is accessible to most of my students: the first set of poems (*Martín*) is a type of bildungsroman, a novel of the moral and psychological growth of the main character, that follows an orphan from his youth on the streets to his development into an adult. The form is a bit harder for students to decipher, at times leaving the students wondering whether what they think just happened really happened. I’ve chosen this as the central text because it not only relates an interesting story, but Baca provides an amazing experience that jumps off the page and envelops the reader in the world of the narrator. He manages to create a picture that is quite alive in the reader’s mind while using his words very sparingly and carefully. One of many examples is the beginning of poem IV in *Martín*:

Grandma Lucero at the table
smokes Prince Albert cigarette
rolled from a can,
sips black coffee from metal cup,
and absorbs hours of silence
like prairie sky absorbs campfire smoke. (2)

In only six lines, Baca paints a scene that engages the reader’s sensory imagination and includes the reader in an understanding of the character and her circumstances.

After reading some of the poems from *Martín*, I will introduce our exploration of artists' lives. Artists' lives tend to be extreme and sensational. Jimmy Santiago Baca's life, for example, was much like that of his character, Martín, in its association to the streets and *barrio* life. My students imagine, though, that if a person is old (i.e. over thirty), then he or she must have "no life." As a result, they cannot imagine that anyone before their generation did anything interesting. I think it will be interesting to monitor their reactions as they get exposure to the lives of artists throughout history. To a certain extent, teenagers seem to want to relate to anyone, and artists provide a good outlet. Students often listen to certain types of music not only for its aesthetic appeal, but because they relate to the message of it and/or the messenger. One of my students, for example, was a Tupac fanatic. Although his life did not seem to bear any real resemblance to the life of Tupac, he felt a certain connection and as a result, the music was meaningful to him. If students could see that writers' lives are just as interesting as, say, rappers' lives, then maybe they might be a little bit more turned on to writers' messages as well.

While not all artists' lives are shocking, I will rely a bit on shock value when deciding which life stories to present to the class. I might show a Van Gogh painting to the class. Then, I would give them a brief synopsis of the factors leading up to the crucial moment when he cut off his ear. Afterwards, I would show them the painting again and see if they saw it in a different light. I might also do similar activities with works by Oscar Wilde, Dorothy Parker, Picasso, Ralph Ellison, and even Shakespeare's sonnets. These artists' sensational lives will hopefully raise student interest in literature and art in general in the same way that the Tupac fan was, because of the rapper's life story, lured into listening and trying to understand his music.

Does Art Matter? What Is Its Purpose?

This third guiding question is perhaps more complicated than the first two. My students complain consistently about reading. They constantly question the reasons that they are forced to read boring books and write boring essays about boring topics that they will never have to use in real life. Their questions are, to a certain extent, valid. If students were to finally find the answer to this question, they might be a little bit more willing to approach the literature with a more open mind, instead of labeling it "boring" before they even open it (if they even open it). Why *do* we as a society place such an importance on the written word? What power does it have in shaping our lives and our society? What power does it have in shaping the artist? As a means of attempting to answer these questions, students will not only observe other art and learn about artists, but they will also go through the experience of creating art and they will attempt to express how it affects them and how they think their work can affect others.

The first question that I will pose, after having spent a bit of time discussing artists' lives is: Why do artists create art? Our starting point will be the second part of *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*. Another reason that I chose this work is that, along with being very artistic, it is also a *kunstlerroman* (a novel of artistic formation). The coming-of-age story present in *Martín* leads to the narrator's artistic formation which comes to its climax in the narrator's literal and symbolic house-building in *Meditations on the South Valley*. In the second of the two narrative poems, the reader finds the older Martín's forging a connection to his past through his poetic retelling of episodes and portraits of people from his past in the *barrio*, now as a writer. When his house burns, his poetry burns as well, but even the ashes of his art provide a way for him to connect to his community, because friends from the *barrio* help him rebuild his home.

Next, we will reread three of the chapters from the end of *The House on Mango Street*: "The Three Sisters," "A House of My Own," and "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes." (Most of the students read this novel in ninth grade.) We will discuss the similarities and differences between the main character, Esperanza, and Martín, discussing their relationships to artistic creation and their respective communities. While Martín builds his house in the South Valley and forges a connection through his art to his people, Esperanza also tells the story of her neighborhood and its people, but yearns to escape its confines.

While discussing the above two works, we will also look at a few short sections of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, one of the best-known novels of artistic formation. We will explore Stephen's relationship to his art, his country, and his religion. We will again compare his formation to the formation stories of Martín and Esperanza. To tie up some of these ideas, we will end this section of the unit by watching a film that is also about an artist's youth, but is a bit more light-hearted: *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*.

Next, we will discuss why societies and individuals need art. We will look at art used for nationalistic purposes, such as the national anthem, patriotic songs, and propaganda (political and commercial). We will discuss whether or not commercial art, such as advertisements, constitute an art form. At this point, I will show clips of *Birth of a Nation*, which is a movie that makes the tension between art, politics, and propaganda quite evident. This movie, while considered a great masterpiece of American cinema is at the same time overtly racist propaganda. While it is full of innovations that were years ahead of its time, it portrays actors in black face who play the "bad guys" while the Ku Klux Klan is portrayed as the hero. Which is more important, style and art or content? Should people watch this movie despite its message? Should it be censored? The issue of censorship will likely produce heated debate, especially since it has acquired new relevance in the wake of September 11. Who, if anyone, should be allowed to censor art? What are valid grounds upon which to base censorship? *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, by Salman Rushdie, is a cautionary tale about the role of censorship told in the form of a fairytale about a village storyteller who runs out of stories. We will read an excerpt from it as a way to further our discussion of censorship. After that, I will rely on current events

to supply the fodder for our discussion of censorship. One that will no doubt hit home for students is whether or not they should be allowed to purchase albums that are deemed “explicit” and whether or not they should carry parent advisory labels.

The next part of this section will be a consideration of the following question: Why do individuals need art? Why do humans feel the need to listen to music, watch movies, or read the comics? Why did so many people latch on to movies as a source of escape after September 11? We will discuss how certain pieces of art become a part of our culture. One mini-assignment will be for my students to find at least one artistic allusion on television or in a book. It might be a reference to a song or a popular movie, a famous painting or a book. We will read a couple of short stories from a comic text, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, as a way to explore the role of comedy in art.

The final question that we will ask ourselves is: What makes art endure? Why do we still read Shakespeare? What was his secret to success? Are we likely to still hear the singer Ashanti on the radio in twenty years? Why or why not? What shapes our reaction to art? Would we really like certain songs if the singers were not featured on the news nightly or if the radio never played them? Since English class is usually based on the reading of works that have endured across decades or even centuries, I will let the students ponder this question as they finish their final projects.

TEACHING METHODS AND LEARNER OUTCOMES

Discovery/Questions-Based Organization

We as teachers know that when we inform students of things they are much less receptive than when they can come up with something on their own. Handing out information is useless unless the students have the desire to know. I know for my students, grades are not enough. They only worry (sometimes) when they might fail. They are accustomed to being passive learners. For this reason, before we as a class look to theorists and experts (philosophers, art theorists, and studies) for guidance, students will try to figure it out for themselves. For example, when we try to come up with a definition of art, students will collectively (in small groups) try to come up with a working definition before we look at art theorists’ definitions. In conjunction to reading about the experiences of artists and viewers of art, students themselves will have to be consumers and producers of art as well.

As one can see below, I have arranged my lessons by grouping them under headings that are questions. These questions are how I plan to present these issues to my students. I will ask them “What is art?” rather than stating, “Art is....” I will ask them “Why do people care about art?” rather than telling them “The purpose of art is....” All of this is not to say that I will never present anything myself and let my students ramble on about unrelated topics until the bell rings. I will of course bear the onus of guiding my students through specific topics and keeping them on track in their explorations.

Reading

The process of reading will be central to the unit. Students will, of course, be asked to read articles, short stories, poetry, and (excerpts of) novels. They will also be asked to “read” paintings, music, and movies. Most of the reading will of course be literature, but we will also discuss current events, music and lyrics, paintings, and movies. Most of my students are not yet at the point where they independently interpret the texts that they read. As the teacher, I have to be very explicit about analysis. In other words, when we read sections aloud in class, I do things such as taking certain words and asking students why the author chose to use that specific wording. Thus part of the process of reading is consistent questioning and discussion of aspects of the work.

Since students will be working on their journals at home, we will do much of the reading in class. This also serves as a way to make sure that students are reading and as a result are capable of participating in classroom discussion.

Socratic Method/Discussion

The way I handle classroom discussion is based loosely on the Socratic method. I constantly challenge students’ assumptions and unexplored beliefs to the point that they get exasperated with me playing “the devil’s advocate.” However, the peril of asking a “big question” to a set of high school students is that they are often tempted to give you a simple answer without reflecting on it too much. In order for them to grasp an issue’s complexity, the teacher needs to make sure that the students examine the exceptions to their arguments and the counterarguments. I will use this method of whole-class discussion when coming up with definitions and explanations. For literary analysis, I find it useful to have students talk through their ideas in small groups of three to four, and then share their ideas with the class. This method is especially helpful with reluctant readers and students who are shy when it comes to raising their hand in front of the whole class.

Creative Writing/Artwork Journal

Throughout the unit, students will keep a journal. In that journal, they will complete one reading response entry and one creative writing or art entry per week as a type of practice for the final project and in order for them to experience art from both the consumer’s and producer’s points of view. They will complete one journal entry per week that relates their experience of reading a text of their choice. They will answer questions such as the following: Under what circumstances did you read/listen/look at the artwork? (i.e. Were you sleepy? Angry? Happy? Distracted?) How did that shape your viewing experience? Did you personally relate to the artwork? Why or why not? How did this affect your viewing experience? What was your “gut reaction” to the work? Why do you think that is? What factors might have influenced this reaction? The response will have to be at least one page in length.

Each student (regardless of artistic inclination) will also complete one piece of art per week for his or her journal (painting, drawing, story, poem, collage, music piece, sculpture, photograph). In their journal entry related to the art piece, they will explain their work, and answer some of the following questions in their explanations: What is the subject of your work: Why did you choose this subject? How did you feel as you went through the process of producing your art? Describe it. How does your experience relate to any of the works you've read so far? The artwork journal entry will also be at least one page in length.

Students will be responsible for writing a total of four reading response journal entries and four artwork journal entries, for a minimum total of eight pages. They will also have to turn in the art pieces created in conjunction with their journals. All of this work will be collected at the end of week five so that I do not have to hold on to too many materials at the same time. (Students will be turning in their bulky final projects at the end of week six.)

The journal will serve as a way for me to make sure that my students are being directly engaged in the process of analyzing art and literature, as well as understanding the process of creating their own art and literature. In addition, students will hopefully choose to create art that they enjoy, so it will probably not be too hard to get them engaged in the process.

Final Project

The final project will consist of two parts: a critical essay and a “multiple arts” adaptation of one of the central texts of the unit. I think that the due dates will be staggered, with the critical essay due a bit earlier than the “multiple arts” adaptation.

The critical essay will be a three-page analytical essay that will focus on one of the topics brought up in class, or a related topic chosen by the student, regarding art (e.g. issues of artistic representation). They will analyze *Martín & Meditations on the South*, choosing a few poems on which to focus their analysis. The essay will have to follow the constructs of a formal essay (MLA format), which is something we will have studied in depth by that point. We will conduct brainstorming and peer editing sessions during class before the students turn in their final drafts.

Without a doubt, my students will complain while writing the formal essay; they always do. However, the “spoonful of sugar” will be that the other half of their final project will be the “multiple arts” adaptation of the text. The challenge to the students will be to create a complete art experience. They will have to use the novel to derive three of the following artistic adaptations (they may choose the three that they would like to complete): a soundtrack, a power point or VHS movie adaptation, a related set of poems, visuals in any form (painting, drawing, photography, or computer graphics), a web site, a video game, or even a choreographed dance.

Another benefit of the multiple art adaptation is that since students will have their own artistic interpretations to share, we can have an exhibit day in class. I will display their projects at different stations around the room (on the walls, on tables, or anywhere I can find space!) and also place large index cards near their work so that other students can write the things that they like about the work. I had my students complete an exhibit day last year in association with a world poetry project, and even the students who openly hated everything related to the study of English admitted that it was their favorite activity of the entire year. Also, to my surprise, even though many of my students were troublemakers, not one student received a rude or negative comment on their comment card. When it came to commenting on work created by their peers, the students were very generous and kind.

The point of the project is simple: students need to see art as an experience, not just a form. If they can view art in any form as an expression of emotion, thought, or feeling, they might be able to lump literature into that category and attempt to understand it without dismissing it before even reading the first page. If literature can relate themes, ideas, and characters that might even be found in a video game, a song, or a movie, then it can't be too bad, right?

SIX WEEK OUTLINE

The following outline is my plan to implement the curriculum unit in my classroom. Our school runs on accelerated block schedule, so I meet with each class of students every day for ninety minutes.

Week One: Toward a Definition

During week one, I will simply require that we come up with some type of answer to the following question: What is art? The first day, I will probably have the students brainstorm on paper their ideas, and then have a discussion or debate. I will have several examples of paintings, contemporary art, music, commercial art, and music that will complicate the students' definitions. If possible, I will coordinate a field trip to the Museum of Contemporary Art and have students focus on 4-5 especially problematic pieces, take notes on their perceptions of these pieces, and share their insights in class the next day. At the end of the week, I will have students discuss their favorite pieces of art. Each student will explain to the class what s/he found "artistic" about the piece, what makes the piece good, and why s/he chose the piece.

Week Two: Integrating Literature

This week, I will integrate the use of literature into our exploration of art and have students read as many poems from *Martín* as possible this week. We will also begin making "translations" between genres. In other words, we will find parallels between

different art forms, but also recognize their differences (see Lesson Plan Number One). Students will also begin their art journal this week.

Weeks Three and Four: The Lives of Artists

To start this section of the unit, we will take a look at the sensational life stories of a select number of artists. We will ask ourselves how a writer's personal life affects his or her art, as well as the viewer's perception of that art. After this, we will move on to the *kunstlerroman*. We will start with *Meditations on the South Valley* and then move on to excerpts from *The House on Mango Street* (the chapters "The Three Sisters," "A House of My Own," and "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes") and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. We will compare the different artists' artistic intentions as well as their formation as artists. Why did they decide to become artists? How did their experiences with their pasts affect their art? What kind of connection can they claim to their homelands? We will end this section by watching *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*, an Italian film who grows up surrounded by movies, goes on to make movies, and indeed most of his memories are in one way or another linked to movies.

Week Five: The Purpose of Art

This week, we will tackle three major questions: Why do artists create art? (This question will be a follow-up to our exploration of the *kunstlerroman*.) Why do societies need art? Why do individuals need art? We will discuss art that serves nationalistic purposes, such as the national anthem and nationalistic propaganda. We will also examine our own reasons for consuming art of different forms. We will read funny stories (from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*) and look at popular films. We will discuss the theory of catharsis stemming from watching tragedy or comedy. Students turn in their art journals on Friday.

Week Six: Polemics in the Art World

This week, we will not tackle too much new material because students will get some class time to work on the final projects. We will discuss a couple of major problems, though. We will revisit the idea of propaganda by looking at commercial art such as advertisements as well as political propaganda. Next, we will watch *Birth of a Nation* which will also lead us to a discussion on the tension between stylistic innovation and perhaps inappropriate content. We will tackle censorship by looking at an excerpt from *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and relate censorship to my students' lives by discussing censorship of music and the internet for young people. The final project will be due Friday. The art exhibit will take place the following week.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One: From Visual to Textual and Back

Objectives

The student will be able to:

- demonstrate and apply an understanding of sensory language.
- use sensory language to convey observations.
- recognize the importance of linguistic devices in conveying meaning.

Materials

The only thing that the teacher will need to prepare beforehand is an excerpt from Martín, stripped of its vivid language. The teacher might want to make a transparency of the “stripped” passage as well as a transparency of the original passage for the class to compare together. The teacher might also want to “scout out” a good location for the students to complete their observations.

Lesson

To open this lesson, I will choose an especially vivid stanza from a segment of *Martín* that we have not yet read. I will then replace any of the sensory words with neutral or not very descriptive words. I will present the bland version to the class and ask students to analyze the passage. Afterwards, I will present the original text to the class and then ask them to analyze the differences that these specific words make. After a quick discussion, we will go outside where students will have to write a description of their surroundings utilizing sensory language. (I will require that each write-up, in order to get a good grade, contain description of things experienced through each of the five senses.) To extend the activity and have them apply the knowledge acquired, I will have students then take their descriptions home and have a family member or friend attempt to draw the scene based solely on the student’s description. When students bring in their drawings the next day, we will compare the drawings, discussing why they look different. We will also try to discern which drawing was most like the actual scene and find how why the student was able to elicit such an accurate drawing.

[Note: One can also complete a similar activity, to explore objectivity and artifice in narratives, by having students translate a poem or song into a newspaper article and create a song or poem from a newspaper article and comparing the two accounts.]

Lesson Plan Two: Translating Experiences onto the Page

Objectives

The student will be able to:

- analyze art pieces for key information.
- use words to describe an artistic experience.

Materials

For this activity, the teacher will need to provide sounds and images for the students to reproduce using words. The teacher may bring in film, pictures from a magazine, a CD, or find pictures and sounds on the internet that would be especially evocative.

Lesson

While the final project will have students create art that stems from a piece of literature, for this activity, they will have to create a literary account of non-textual art pieces. I will present several video clips, show some art pieces, and have students listen to sounds and music. In groups of 3, students will have to try to create a text (it can be poetry or prose) that captures the essence of the non-textual work. Either on a handout or on the board, I will have a vocabulary list that students can reference if they get stuck. Students will get only a few minutes to write something that can capture the work. After they have come up with their description, one student from each group will read the description aloud and we will discuss who did the best and why their description was the best.

Lesson Plan Three: Artistic Representation versus “The Real World”

Objectives

The student will be able to:

- articulate their views on a controversial issue.
- compare art pieces of different genres.

Materials

Students will need to have a copy of *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* at their disposal. The teacher will need to bring in music that exemplifies the dilemma of artists in elite positions attempting to represent people of lower social status (e.g. commercial rappers rapping about poverty, country singers singing about being “down and out”).

Lesson

A major problem in the art and literary worlds is the idea of representation. A writer or artist is usually in a somewhat elite position, either for educational or financial reasons. Therefore, can that person accurately portray the lives of the non-elite (i.e. the poor or the oppressed)? Martín, for example, claims to want to accurately represent the people of his barrio. However, merely by virtue of the fact that he is a writer and therefore in certain ways no longer part of the barrio, is he qualified to do so? We will make the comparison to music. Many singers create a luxurious life for themselves by rapping about the downtrodden. A wonderful example of this is the commercial rap world. Can a rapper like P. Diddy truly claim to represent “the streets” when his life is so far removed from that reality and when, in fact, he grew up in the suburbs? We will use these two examples to have a whole-class discussion.

ENDNOTES

1. de Botton, Alain. *The Romantic Movement*, p.19.
2. Baca, Jimmy Santiago. *Martín & Meditations on the South Valley*, p. 15.

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Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 1972.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, 1984.

de Botton, Alain. *The Romantic Movement: Sex, Shopping, and the Novel*. New York: Picador USA, 1994.

Freeland, Cynthia. *But is it Art?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Griffiths D.W. (director). *Birth of a Nation*. Castle Hill Productions, 1915.

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Rushdie, Salman. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. London: Granta Books in association with Penguin Books, 1991.

Tornatore, Giuseppe (writer/director). *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*. Miramax, 1988.

Thomas, Dylan. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1940.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Teacher Resources

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 1972.

An excellent source for understanding art theory and understanding the way in which we view art.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

This is both a comprehensive and accessible tool that is excellent for the high school English classroom (and even the college classroom). It is helpful when trying to explain to students the fundamentals of literary analysis. For the purposes of this curriculum unit, the section entitled “Identity, Identification, and the Subject” is especially useful.

Freeland, Cynthia. *But is it Art?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

This book is concise and an excellent way for an instructor to get acquainted with the world of art theory and the issues that face the contemporary art world. It synthesizes information from philosophical, popular, and even political perspectives.

Gallup, Alison, Gerhard Gruitrooy, and Elizabeth M. Weisberg. *Great Paintings of the Western World*. New York: Beaux Arts Editions, 1997.

This is a large art book. It contains many color reproductions of famous artwork from cave paintings to Andy Warhol. While I do not necessarily recommend this particular art book, I do feel that it is important to have a comprehensive art book in the classroom for the teacher and the students to reference.

Student Resources

Baca, Jimmy Santiago. *Martín & Meditations on the South Valley*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1987.

This set of two long narrative poems will be the central focus of the unit. The first poem (*Martín*) is about an orphan from the *barrio* and his search for a home. It is a stunningly vivid set of poems that will help us figure out how writers use the art of literature to relate experiences and stories. The second poem (*Meditations on the South Valley*) shows his turn to writing as a way to connect to his community and cultural heritage. I will challenge my students with the following question: Since Baca writes, through his narrator Martín, about street and gang life from the vantage point of one who is affiliated with “high” art, and no longer the streets, can he accurately present that life and claim that he is still affiliated with it?

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, 1984.

Much like the main character in *Martín*, the main character in this novel (Esperanza)

struggles to find a home for herself. She imagines a home away from the ghetto where she lives, far away from the oppressive patriarchal structure of her *barrio*. This imaginary house is made for one (only herself), outside of the *barrio*, and is to be filled with poetry and creativity. Is there an inherent contradiction between one's roots and the possibility of creating art? Do oppressive environments somehow give greater fuel to the artistic spark? Why must a writer escape in order to create?

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

This novel follows the development of a writer from childhood to young adulthood. He struggles with the notions of nation, religion, and language, finally deciding that he must escape his country in order to free himself from its creative oppression. Are artists naturally escapists? Since the main character in the novel is closely related to Joyce himself, isn't it a bit ironic that Joyce left Ireland only to return artistically to it? Does art provide a connection to one's home that one cannot attain as a writer within its confines? (This novel can be extremely difficult for students, so along with the excerpts, I might show corresponding excerpts from the movie version and will definitely play the corresponding sections on the Books on Tape version.)

Rushdie, Salman. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. London: Granta Books in association with Penguin Books, 1991.

This, Rushdie's first novel while in "hiding," is a type of fairy tale about the importance of free speech and the problems of censorship. This is an accessible text that can help my students begin to explore some of the issues that constrain a writer's creative potential in oppressive governments.

Thomas, Dylan. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1940.

As one can tell by its title, this collection of stories is a bit of a spoof on the idea behind Joyce's *kunstlerroman*. The autobiographical stories are a hilarious recounting of Thomas's youth and the unique and quirky characters that populated his experience. We will read a couple of these stories to discuss the role of humor in our perception of art. Even though we study comedy in the English classroom less than we do more "serious" stories, it certainly has its own set of devices, and much of the art that appeals to students uses humor.

Filmography

Birth of a Nation (1915) Castle Hill Productions; Directed by D. W. Griffiths.

I will show students clips from this movie as a way to get them to think about some of the polemics of the art world. This movie, while considered a great masterpiece of American cinema is at the same time overtly racist propaganda. While it is full of innovations that were years ahead of its time, it portrays actors in black face who play the "bad guys" while the KKK is portrayed as the hero. Which is more important,

style/art or content? Should people watch this movie despite its message? Should it be censored? I will ask these kinds of questions of my students.

Nuovo Cinema Paradiso (1988) Miramax; Written and Directed by Giuseppe Tornatore.

During the time when we focus on the kunstlerroman, I will show this movie. It is an Italian movie about a young boy in Sicily who has a love affair with the movies practically his whole life. Through this love, he gains a father figure in the local theater projectionist and learns about life beyond his small town. He later becomes a moviemaker himself and is able to tell the story of his youth and his town.

(There are many recent movies about artists, which one can use in the classroom in exploring artists' lives, especially if your students cannot sit through subtitles. Just a few of the ones that I know about are: *Basquiat*, *Piñero*, and *Pollock*. I chose this particular movie because it is a fun and sweet story, while it is still appropriate for younger high school students. This movie often goes by *Cinema Paradiso* in the U.S. rather than its full title.)