

For Reading, Writing, and Laughing Out Loud

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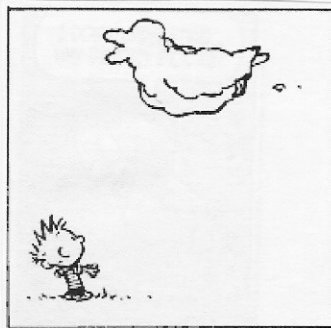
INTRODUCTION

Bells ring, whistles blow, lights flash, the idea of students mastering rhetorical strategies through the pages of the newspaper calls out to be organized, folded into the curriculum, and referenced daily. The student who realizes that the comic effect is created by using such devices as situational irony, onomatopoeia, and allusion can transfer this knowledge into getting hip with *Julius Caesar* or the *Odyssey*. Just this is desired: Using the comics to teach the mechanics of the literal level of literature rapidly may result in greater and quicker comprehension—more bang for the buck.

This inspiring idea looks like modeling the literary devices, strategies, and techniques crucial to the human voice with humor. Of course, yes, the comics provide pleasure, but they also thrive on brevity and being memorable. How quickly and clearly comics stand armed and ready to prompt recognition of innumerable conventions! How vast and full of variety stands the comic library of archetypal rhetoric, delightfully demonstrating infinitely and exponentially into eternity! How seamlessly a chuckle can connect us to the ever-pulsing passages of life!

Of course, the literary strategies are not learned just for the sake of sophistication. Dramatic irony, rising action, and analogy are terms that instantly start the brain thinking, naturally going on to making an analysis, arriving at an understanding, and taking the theme on to the mythical and universal levels of interpretation. The hapless student stands mute without a vocabulary – really a structure or channel of thinking – to help explore ideas to a depth and breadth of enlightenment.

CATCHING THE DRIFT



(Watterson 7)

Imagine a cartoon depicting a young Calvin, the protagonist and often antagonist of *Calvin and Hobbes* fame, staring at a cloud. It looks like a normal day with normal activities, but truth becomes manifest through an interaction with the seemingly random events of life. An epiphany may be at hand at any moment -- to be captured or to be ignored. Calvin mentions to his mom, busy at gardening, that a particular cloud is imitating a duck. “Imitating,” yes, the child said “imitating.” Now, do we witness a teaching moment, an example of personification before our very eyes?

Clouds thrive as vapor animated by wind. This particular cloud, animated by Watterson, seems to move with feathers puffed up like a graduate of acting school. (The cloud is imitating a duck, remember.) If the teacher alludes to Calvin’s comic cloud once or twice at the most, the student thereafter will be recalling the cloud’s personification without a prompt. Imagine when Macbeth’s approach becomes observed by one witch who mentions to her weird sisters, “Something wicked this way comes,” her voice — no doubt — dripping with a sarcastic tone since their own evil nature has

been surpassed. He, not they, stands as the better personification of evil. And, yes, personification can be used as a symbol of an abstract idea. If Macbeth had taken the hint about what he has now come to designate, demonstrate, and impersonate, the play would have been a bit shorter—even if with a lot less irony, especially with less of the valuable dramatic irony. Isn't it always the super focuser who is the last to know? Obsession blinds the actor but enlightens the audience. The insight is all there in the literary terms.

So, students sometimes personify a rock when they sense a lecture on literary terms actively stalks them; however, they do respond to the thing they have experienced the most and understood the best since birth: media. Consider the story “The Most Dangerous Game,” a staple of the ninth grade curriculum, and “Ozymandias,” an essential poem of tenth grade pre-advanced placement English, and the dire need for the student to perceive character. Vapor to cloud to duck, what does the character look like? Just as Macbeth personifies evil with an ambitious twist, General Zaroff personifies the smug, self-satisfied connoisseur of high living who has twisted his sport into sadistic terrorism. Also, continuing with the cloud's drift, Ozymandias, the “king of kings,” becomes sculptured by the perceptive artist come protagonist (Percy Shelly's alter ego) in the poem as nothing more than a “sneer of cold command” personified. Calvin (the cartoon artist's alter ego) guides the students to see personification, and the students grow into understanding characters personifying and symbolizing some abstract evil. More on how the evil Zaroff looks will follow the continued discussion of how the comic pages of the newspaper stands adapt at making all roads lead to a vital reality check.

The need for the students to proceed through the curriculum with a dynamic understanding of literary devices, even if perceived by them as a bitter pill, cannot be denied. We cannot dumb down to them or be ignored by them. Painfully put, in the days of state and federal mandated tests of measurement, a narrow focus on success with minimal skills as defined by well-meaning laws has left a generation aghast when confronted with depth and complexity. Students facing a formidable work of literature (or any work of art) can find themselves hunkered down with a limited repertoire of knowledge and skills, a paradoxical result of teachers terrorized into teaching to the test.

The comics provide rapid pace, making vertical expansion practical. A worthy goal! Introducing upcoming features in the next reading is quick, fast, and easy. Reviewing the reoccurring features is also made practical by visiting these same features in the comics, or the funny papers as my family metaphorically called them in the early 1950s. Moreover, enrichment emerges as an achievement when the reader visualizes and connects with reading because of fluency with conventions used by writers. This is the age in which a graphic novel has won a Pulitzer Prize. The Sunday funnies, a potential nexus between reading and experiencing, promise to develop introspection about both one's own life and literature. Connecting is an active reading skill practiced by the best. The other side of the coin is that comparing is also an active reading skill that reaps results. Placing a cartoon with a metaphor next to a work of literature with a metaphor will make the unknown become as familiar as the known. Or, make the difficult depth of literature as accessible as the funny of a comic strip.

The logical modus operandus stands outlined above by need and purpose. The comics will not be a separate study of literary terms; it will be woven within the strand of objectives currently covered. It will be a thread of extra strength and flexibility adding value to the overall fabric. For example, “The Most Dangerous Game” will be introduced effectively and efficiently with a *Funky Winkerbean* strip that features a dramatic use of foreshadowing and its resulting suspense. Death will be looking over the shoulders of the protagonists in the rising action of both “stories.”

Naturally, lots of cartoons that skillfully target inference, generalization, and drawing conclusions will be selected as the students practice predicting what will next complicate the conflict in both stories.

This narrator has chosen cartoons that are personally found in the course of developing a “Comic Unit.” Thus, the reader can see that material will present itself simply when reading the *Houston Chronicle* daily or by selecting books by the authors of favorite cartoonist for a classroom library—should funds become available. The key here is that the students and teachers are excavating material from the same field. Multi-tasking can happen when the teacher uses the newspaper to promote silent sustained reading to prepare for the extended reading required in testing. Mutual reading and researching equals working smart. Why? Our students too often come from families where no member sees any other member reading or writing. Reading the comics as a drop everything and read part of the classroom routine can mean peers see peers willfully reading and maybe even hearing their friends willfully laugh out loud. At first the students resist being asked to read on their own, but the comics and other newspaper features such as the sports section win them over. I have seen reluctant readers become habitual readers craving a preferred activity. The newspaper and the comics in particular seem to be the most winsome of reading activities.

Facilitating all this activity and learning can be the “*Chronicle* in Education” or “Donors Choose,” programs that provide newspapers and books to Houston area classrooms. The earnest teacher wishing to bring light and laughter into classrooms possibly dominated by youngsters on free lunch and living among myriad distractions will find relief and support. They can be accessed through their websites, www.chron.com/cie and www.donorschoose.org. Free newspapers will have the students reading and chuckling right through the comics and into textbook literature. The teacher and student can build a file of comics illustrating literary terms by starting the day with the stories contained in the panels of the strips. It is a fun activity, and starts the brain thinking in a pleasing way, proving to be a great warm-up. Needing an illustration of a literary term, the teacher can go to the classroom file. During the course of a year, this teacher built a respectable file, which fulfills a need. The cartoons to illustrate the stories discussed in this project came from the file and were then verified with comic archives from websites where the artist’s products are available. The websites perform a showcase for the artists of comics and generate some income for them. The items clipped from the *Chronicle* grow yellow and get smudged in the file. A clean copy can be secured by using the date on the comic to access the archives on the web sites. The addresses of the web sites include www.Comics.com, www.DailyInk.com, and www.Mycomicpage.com.

In addition, each cartoon strip also has its own website, and the *Houston Chronicle* also maintains an archive of cartoons in its entertainment section via its website. A teacher can have newspapers physically delivered or accesses the comics through the Internet. The actual newspapers are great because they offer many other possibilities and have proven to me that they can start my students on a lifetime habit of reading. If you surmise that I have been teaching in one neighborhood long enough to teach my student’s children, you are correct. I am granted the opportunity to track some individuals. I am emphasizing to use cartoons “found” daily as well as those preserved from the past. Keep it an active rather than a canned thing with no student participation. With direction, the students themselves can make the comic pages their lab and thus find parallels between continuing classroom activities, the human situation, and an individual smile with a laugh. What a romp! Pardon me, what an educational romp.

The “Reading, Writing, and Laughing Out Loud” unit involves introducing a literary term with examples from the comics, relying on the plural word “examples.” The exposure to many specific illustrations leads to reinforcement. Like vocabulary, identifying and actually using terms involves numerous exposures, almost countless encounters to reach dynamic and fluent usage. The comics can replicate the archetypal term easier and in a memorable way that long hours of habitual reading can’t do so quickly. Start with many comics to help define the literary term. Other cartoon examples of terms will present themselves to offer a comparison or parallel with a particular story. Comparison represents a higher thinking skill that helps the student make a decision or draw a conclusion. They have a better interpretation of a specific event or character statement if these can be immediately compared to a parallel comic. In between, the experiences of the student in life can form a trinity of comparisons: literature, comic, and life. Pushing the concept, the specifics of literature will bring comparisons to movies and TV programs into possibility. Comics start a chain reaction of comparison, something desirable to comprehension and better writing. Use parallel comics during the reading of literature. Finally, follow up with more comics as re-teaching. A comic can be a flashcard; look at the comic and name the literary term(s) or device(s).

SPECIFIC SCENES

No argument convinces like an actual sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—an experience. A discussion and presentation of some experiences with comics introducing the literary terms involved in textbook stories can give a sample taste of a comic to literature program. “The Most Dangerous Game” always draws some enthusiasm from the male students and is therefore an important story in the current McDougal Littell adoption. The conflicts make it an ever popular adventure story. The types of conflict can now be abundantly illustrated with a romp through the funny papers as the story is read. I do indeed teach conflict in “The Most Dangerous Game.” The comics make it easier and faster, and I have time to teach companion devices that are also essential.

Most assuredly, I want to draw out some other important elements that show it is not a superficial story while encouraging that conflict and suspense be used in the student’s own writing of personal narratives. The use of suspense in the story lets the students identify with the feelings of the protagonist, which leads to a strong perspective on the story’s theme. The story plays out dramatically in its twists and turns (plot), so if the student sees the way literary terms such as foreshadowing, suspense, and perspective work, the theme lives. I want to give a narrative of my approach toward teaching some crucial and important devices for both the author and reader to share, each for their own reasons.

“Suspense” results from foreshadowing with shrewdly planted hints about what will happen next in a carefully perfected work of art. Crucial to drawing a reader into a narrative, suspense keeps the reader involved in the narrative and keeps the reader wanting to read with curiosity. The writer of *The Most Dangerous Game*, Richard Connell, embedded suggestions in his story that an evil mind lurks, looms, and lingers somewhere — largely unseen — ruthlessly manipulating the physical world, selfishly providing himself with an antidote to his boredom. No wonder the suspenseful setting, the time and place that set the mood, invokes the following statement on board a ship in the hot and humid Caribbean while passing General Zaroff’s Shiptrap Island: “Don’t you feel anything? – It’s as if the air about us was actually poisonous. Now, you mustn’t laugh when I tell you this – I did feel something like a sudden chill” (Connell in *The Language of Literature* 40). The ominous setting, so diabolical and clearly not fortuitous,

grants an anticipatory mood, and the mood floods the reader with the foreshadowing of grim turning grimmer. Where has Calvin's drifting cloud taken us?

In the midst of this thickening atmosphere, it needs to be pointed out that hunting is not always a sport. In the case of Zaroff, the use of powerful weapons, highly trained dogs, and a formidable back-up assistant almost certainly determines the outcome if not the exact time and place. A *Calvin and Hobbes* setting illustrates the predicament in hunting and sometimes the abandonment to fate of brave souls in general. As an all too objective and cool Hobbes watches, Calvin, the artist commentator on life, sculpts a gruesome snowman scene. With mouth grimacing, an angst-ridden snowman with the customarily rounded body and expected skinny stick arms frantically swims horizontally through an ocean of snow attempting to escape a pack of shark fins within easy striking distance. The gifted and talented Calvin makes an understatement: "That Guy's a goner" (Watterson 139). Parallelism!

With this same sense of impending doom, the irrepressible General Zaroff, hints at how he has fitted out his private island for the "sport" of hunting the world's most dangerous game: "Hunting tigers ceased to interest me some years ago. I exhausted their possibilities, you see. No thrill left in tigers, no real danger. I live for danger" (Connell in *The Language of Literature* 47). The words are somewhat an example of verbal irony since the hunter has so many advantages and is seldom in any real danger, yet they hint that a frustrated man is a dangerous creature. Zaroff certainly chooses his words carefully to avoid revealing the exact species of the game, which is more dangerous than tigers or the largest monster to hunt, the Cape buffalo. Are the students and their teacher ready to guess the species? Are we thinking aloud about what game would be most capable of bringing harm to the hunter? Are we answering the writer's call for a prediction, and attempting to answer the question "What will happen next?"



(Batiuk 8-4-2005)

Can a cartoon preview the same kind of threat predicted in Connell's writing? Turn to the adventures of Funky Winkerbean and company. Imagine being in a sterile mountain place. Visualize two legs and feet standing there among the lone and unleveled rocks stretching forever into eternity. Note the American style shoes and jeans with an object just behind the left heel looking suspiciously like the curse of a war ravaged country, a land mine. Hear Funky's friend Wally, camera in hand, ironically announce, "Before we go... I just want to take one last shot," his face innocent of the foreshadowing interlaced in the

word "last" (Batiuk 8-4-2005). Please look to see what is behind his left heel in the panel below. Will he step back like a photographer attempting to get the most scenery in his shot? Will his foot find one of the prongs set to release a furious explosion? Will he never again see Montoni's Pizza, the gathering place advertised on his t-shirt? Please, do show this cartoon before you read "Most Dangerous Game." In fact, why not before, during, and after? It's that great, that relevant, and that suspenseful.

Naturally, Calvin's cloud did not drift to Shiptrap Island alone. The accompanying vapors coalesce around Zaroff, looking like smoke signals that proclaim: 1. suspense, curiosity about what will happen next; 2. foreshadowing, hints about what will happen next that will build

suspense; and 3. prediction, attempts to answer the question, what will happen next? The point being it is time to activate the teacher pack rat instinct. Visit the file of literary terms with cartoons on each topic. Before, during, and after any reading, show various cartoons as attention getters, definers, expanders, and confirmers. For example, the *Funky Winkerbean* cartoon is part of a month long series done in conjunction with an organization campaigning against land mines. The suspense never lets up for the entire span of the series, panel after panel.

Getting specific, the land mine was not constructed to explode when stepped on initially. A spring mechanism would activate when the prospective victim disturbed the device, hurling the fury of the land mine into the air to ensure wider carnage. Thus, Wally lived in purgatory as he stood unable to step away or shift his weight without releasing the dynamic tension of the spring. Visualize the suspense when his sweetheart calls his cell phone and he can't answer without changing the all important configuration between man and mechanism. Live the dread and sense of doom as Wally tells his Afghani guide to get in the truck and drive away to safety even as he feels the pressure of the land mine against his foot. His Afghani guide refuses to leave, tries unsuccessfully to deactivate the explosive with a screwdriver and eventually plans to "bat" the bomb away during the moment of opportunity when it springs into the air but hasn't exploded. Of course, the catch remains Kahn has only enjoyed baseball on American TV without actually ever playing the game. He comes up to bat for the first time with strikes one, two, and three wrapped up into one single swing at knocking a home run for Wally, and we are talking about making home base and not about a heavenly home. Kahn wields a stick instead of a bat and it isn't a ball but an infamously dangerous "Bouncing Betty" explosive. This too adds up to a most deadly game.

This deadly comic further connects and compares with the "Dangerous" story because a land mine basically functions as a trap that often kills the intended target but just as often kills a child tending domestic animals or the very animal keeping the family from facing starvation. The narrator, Sanger Rainsford, as the hunted, survives by ironically using a particular skill he acquired as a hunter, the ability to build a trap, a tiger pit. The quirks and twisted results of such lethal but primitively targeted weapons reverberates back and forth amongst the literature, the comic art, and, ultimately, the curious student. Rainsford traps and eventually kills – in self-defense – an innocent dog and later an arguably innocent mute assistant, but ultimately fails to catch the conniving culprit Zaroff.

These pseudo-violent and adventure elements appeal to the adolescent boys in particular who often feel left out in the exploration of literature. The image of being studious does not always vibrate well with the pimp motif of campus life. This parable of the evils of abusing the disadvantaged and this cartoon lamenting the after effects on simple humans of war can catch high school captives amused by the construction of ideas in works of art and unfocused on maintaining the image of conformity to a D- average. All this can be achieved with no drill to kill, but with a quick variety of exposures.

Still playing with the idea of human preying on human one can allude to the classic cartoon where every year Charlie Brown trusts Lucy to hold the football, and where his is yearly rewarded with the football being jerked away at the last possible moment. Thereupon, Calvin's cloud drifts into theme, the idea being examined or explored in a work of art. The teacher can bring out from the file a cartoon full of foreshadowing in a *Baldo* episode from March of 2005 where thieves try



(Cantu and Castellanos
3-22-2006)

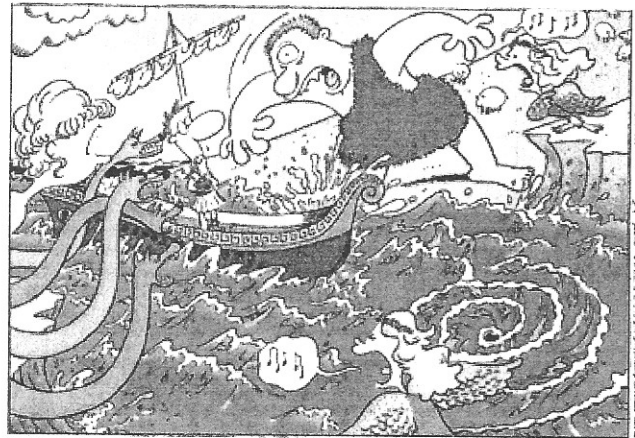
to trick Tia Carmen out of her savings account by offering to share a winning lotto ticket. Of course, they are really only interested in “sharing” her life savings between themselves. They want her to put up a “deposit” of five thousand dollars to share their fictitious winnings. A mood of suspense about the fate of the elderly woman, so anxious to help and yet so vulnerable, pervades the panels.

Similar to the *Winkerbean* cartoon, the *Baldo* series represents collaboration with a special group, this time a Hispanic group concerned with issues for people at the bottom of the food chain. For several steps in the plot, it appears that the hunted in both “Dangerous” and *Baldo* might suffer the awful prediction given in a *Pearls before Swine* comic. Pig faithfully writes down his hopes and dreams and tucks them away in a ceramic vase, which eventually slips out of his hooves and shatters on the ground.



(Pastis 1-24-2006)

Death and poverty stalk everyone directly or indirectly in a title one school – just as in literature and as in the comics. A “hopes and dreams” vase can be fragile in the home of a lower income family. The teacher’s comic file proves relevant and more resilient than the fated vase. The file can awaken associations within struggling individuals. The active reader realizes and connects with literature as illustrated by one panel from a *Baby Blues* comic where the frazzled father mentally pictures a shopping trip with Zoe, Hammie, and Wren. He is a tiny figure overwhelmed by his surroundings. The expedition seems as fraught with danger as any by Odysseus who remained ever protective of his foolish but fellow island warriors while facing the Cyclopes swinging, the Sirens singing, and even whirlpools sucking downward.



(Kirkman 3-5-2006)

Sometimes its suspense and sometimes it is full blown stress with Wally and the land mine or panic-stricken parenthood in *Baby Blues*. Hopefully, the connection between art and life broadens the suspense motif in an individual student’s life to the universal level. Hopefully, at that level, literature becomes a resource for moving into a higher metacognitive level and into seeing beyond hand to mouth existence and into greater possibilities: epic and Odysseusian efforts to achieve personal goals.

Thus the astute reader, actively considering how suspense functions as a bridge connecting the circumstances of characters in art and the circumstances of the reader, might suspect that there is a theme beyond curiosity (suspense) in “The Most Dangerous Game.” Profoundly so! Calvin’s cloud has many shapes. Indeed, the theme can be determined by asking who has the problem and what is the problem. Here, at first, both the protagonist and the antagonist of “The Most Dangerous Game” share a problem, a misconception. Both the highly competent and highly

skilled Rainsford and Zaroff originally stand unable to move beyond their elite status and comprehend that other pilgrims through life have feelings, too. Rainsford, a technically sophisticated hunter but future slave to Zaroff's whim, ironically asserts about the hunted, "Bah! They've no understanding" (Connell in *The Language of Literature* 40). His conversation companion, Whitney, diplomatically and yet prophetically responds, "Even so, I rather think they understand one thing -- fear. The fear of pain and the fear of death," his words foreshadowing and predicting twists in the development of the problem (40).

The irony is that the reader always thinks that the problem must be the physical problem. The problem is actually one of situational irony where appearances are mistaken for reality. In "Dangerous" Rainsford must physically survive, but the real dilemma is spiritual. The "Golden Rule" lies shattered, as broken as Pig's vase. The hunter is in far greater danger when he rationalizes the evil he imposes upon the hunted for mere self satisfaction. He falls short by not doing as he would have others do for him. The hunter's pride rules the situation, and, as with the most deadly sin, leads to absolute degradation. He who has the gold can make the rules of the hunt, but only at the peril of their own soul. In the end, Rainsford has reinvented himself. He gives Zaroff a chance in a fair fight, something the worldly general has never thought about doing in his unholy wholly egocentric existence.



(Watterson 11)

To help define the main idea for the students, some cartoons on perspective, or point of view, identify the problematic idea being explored with the hunted and hunter conflict. For example, in the first panel of a comic in Bill Watterson's *There's Treasure Everywhere*, Calvin decides he is ready, willing, and able to end the day's learning experience at school. He bids his fellow students and whomever, "See you all tomorrow" (Watterson 11)! Strolling outside to be with his cloud instead of being in school may not seem such a good idea in the perspective of more mature souls. One panel explains and presents the conflict he meets in his path and perfectly defines perspective:

Students at Waltrip High School (or anywhere in the Houston Independent School District or everywhere all across America) stand a better chance of grabbing the theme and running with it if they understand perspective: a term for beliefs and attitudes which underlie statements and actions in literature and life. Take another look at Miss Wormwood and decide if she even slightly looks ready to surrender her beliefs and attitudes about student achievement. Arms crossed, eyes set, and mouth fixed, she has no internal conflicts about an external conflict with Calvin's beliefs and attitudes. The dots on her ample dress symbolize a virtual army, navy, air force, and marine corps of determined eyes trained on immediately adjusting Calvin's plan, seemingly so logical and so appropriate. Now, let the students consider the massive advantages Zaroff has when he decides to hunt Rainsford. Also, let them consider Calvin and the moment when Rainsford briefly panics. Miss Wormwood, Calvin, General Zaroff, Rainsford – so different and so very much alike in a clash of wills brought on by perspective, or a lack of perspective.

The versatile teacher can fine tune the perspective issue involved in the main idea with a comic entitled "Sesame Street Addresses Hunting" (Piraro 3-21-2006). The artist has the elementary characters reveal no ambiguity as they betray their flat character status in a full-blown attack on a hapless man dressed in hunting clothing. "Kind" Mr. Snuffleupagus aggressively wraps his trunk in a chokehold around the hunter's neck and lifts him off the ground. Meanwhile, "whimsical" Big Bird physically teaches the man a lesson by plummeting him with the butt end

of his own dropped rifle. What happened to the shyness of these creatures that allowed chubby cheeked children to identify with them?

Compare with how Rainsford once naively expressed the philosophy that “The world is made up of two classes – the hunters and the hunted. Luckily, you and I are hunters” (Connell in *The Language of Literature* 40). Woa! Think again. Like the “run away” Sesame characters, Rainsford eventually rejects this world view when Zaroff invites him to join in hunting motley sailors rounded up from shipwrecks caused by his withdrawal warning lights from strategic lighthouses. Having done the right thing, Rainsford now looks like a superior animal that would use intelligence wit, and cunning to try and escape – the ideal game. Sadly, we do live in an existential world that makes our ideals become situational and circumstantial in perspective. However, using the comics can help teachers and students see how few of us would ever become “dangerous game” if the society which we all compose consistently followed the golden rule, the one that says to treat others as we would have them treat us. Collectively, society should diminish the tendency to make rules that trick others for the benefit of a few with the gold. Spotlighting such a theme with an understanding of perspective grows into one of the best of good deeds that a teacher can do.

Like a starry night with a serendipitous bonus of lustrous moonlight, another valuable and closely related theme to “Dangerous” can be found in a ninth grade curriculum story “The Possibility of Evil,” by Shirley Jackson and in *Luann*, a comic featuring teenagers by Greg Evans. The possibility of connecting literature, comics, and life continues to remain ever-present in this example. The students could be asked to write about “who has the problem and what is it” in a panel about life at Pitts Senior High School (pun -- no doubt -- intended). An antagonist and nemesis of every geeky, homely, or just average teenager, Tiffany, has announced that she has “decided” to become “Miss Chamber of Congress.” On cue, a less perfect peer (oxymoron intended) offers the possible correction that she is talking about the “Chamber of Commerce,” and that a winner does not “decide” for herself but is judged by worthy individuals in a pageant. Never without confidence (the “P” on her cheerleader sweater must surely stand for the deadly sin of Pride as well as for Pitts High), the future title holder reveals her script for the expected eventuality.



Evans 3-20-2006

After the students comment on the panel theme and make predictions in their journals, one and all will love the outcome of the episode. Not knowing to leave well enough alone, the bookless (character revelation) Tiffany instructs the lesser student body who travels along that her decisions mean it happens. OK. Except, the supposed novice points out with an ambiguous question/statement, “You decided to fail the math test last week?” (Evans). This raises questions about Tiffany’s grasp of reality or at least her priorities. When the character turns out to be the last to know or faces life without knowing the truth about themselves and the situation, dramatic irony blooms in profusion. Just remember how Macbeth did an evil drama that outdid the witches with little more self-awareness than Calvin’s cloud imitating a duck.

Powerful and profound, dramatic irony convinces jurors to accept the verdict of the supreme judge, truth. Like the example of Macbeth shows, someone may win, but still lose all respect. Miss Strangeworth with a dainty walk and long rustling skirts has -- like Tiffany with the privilege of wearing stylishly short skirts -- lost touch with inner reality. Maybe less comical and

more threatening than Tiffany, Miss Strangeworth considered herself the guardian of her town's purity and we do repeat the word "her" in "her town" to emphasize her attitude that there were many possibilities for evil and only one Strangeworth (her) left to lead and live graciously. Up until the last page, the town respected its matriarch, but inevitably an accidental revelation of her most intentionally secret activities may result in even more bizarre behavior. The situational irony, a clash between appearance and reality, is paralleled by a *Brevity* comic where a wide-eyed sheep at the head of a herd lost in the wilderness tops the crest of a hill only to discover a disorientating truth. Momentarily paused, a heap of twining barbed branches with a remarkable resemblance to the rounded curls of the sheep's wool has them too at a standstill. A sheep announces, "Oh brother, we've been following a tumbleweed all this time" (Endore and Kaiser and 3-12-2006).

One person has discovered that the lady on Pleasant Street lives as a false example, a charlatan, and an inappropriate symbol for the town. Knowing there is no truth to her anonymously written letters asserting that people may have been betrayed by their loved ones, she still writes anyway and has numerous citizens "worried" and "looking" unhealthy because trust now seems out of the question (Jackson in *The Language of Literature* 175). Admittedly unconcerned with facts, she misleads, perverts, and destroys faith just because of the possibility that there may be evil. Finally, the one who discovers Miss Strangeworth wrote the note that demolishes his paternal pride in his daughter, in turn, destroys her pride and joy, her rose garden. Detaching herself from her own destructive but seemingly enjoyable letter writing, she does not look within but outside herself and cries "silently for the wickedness of the world" (181). Totally symbolizing and personifying dramatic irony in her last thoughts of the story, Miss Strangeworth avoids admitting the truth of her inward evilness, instead projecting it onto the descendants of others who failed to build a statue to memorialize her grandfather.

Echoing the unhealthy ignorance of the inner self, Tiffany in the *Luann* series about her reign as a beauty queen constantly acts out dramatic irony. In the process, her actions lead the students at Pitts and our students to greater acquaintance with the dynamics of irony. Not being great readers in a media age, the youngsters can still digest comic stories rapidly and employ a needed repertoire of variations on the archetype of dramatic irony. For

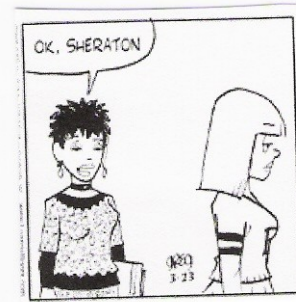


(Evans 3-21-2006)

example, Tiffany's writing, more public than Miss Strangeworth's, leads others to see her overreaching mission. In a perfect example of verbal irony, saying one thing but actually meaning another, Tiffany never seems to acknowledge her recklessness. The irrepressible Tiffany, writing her acceptance speech in advance, promises to execute myself with the fullest of my ability" (Evans 3-21-06). As if that wasn't bad enough, a nearby lesser peer, a captive audience, comments on the mistake in a statement with a double meaning. Self-possessed, Tiffany does not seem to notice.

Obviously, Tiffany grows into an entertaining resource for understanding dramatic irony and, therefore, character development in literature, but she is also a resource for comparison. Wise decisions result from comparisons; a better understanding of Miss Strangeworth results because of Tiffany. The meaning of Miss Strangeworth is clarified in the comparison. Both processes are active reading skills.

Fortunately, Tiffany provides even richer material yet for dealing with the Pleasant Street lady. Self-sufficient to an extreme, Miss Strangworth surprisingly did have a steady date to the basketball games in high school. Upon graduation however, he stopped being called “Tommy” and became “Mr. Lewis” when she greeted him as he stood behind the counter of his grocery store. She stopped being “Addie” and became Miss Strangeworth of Strangeworth House, so proper, prim and apropos. Tiffany also feels that her forthcoming upgrade in status merits a similar ratcheting up in name, something comparable to a person she sees as a mentor, the notorious Paris Hilton. The lesser peer trumps again when she suggests a tour de force of a paraphrasing proper noun, Sheraton St. Louis. It is a go to go and collect two hundred dollars for the lesser peer when Tiffany – seemingly oblivious to the absurdity of using a parody of someone else’s name in a beauty pageant – loves the tag and wraps it around herself (Evans 3-22-06). Moreover, the strawberry crowning the frosting of the cheesecake is what happens just after Tiffany graciously allows that friends can call her “Sher” instead of “Sheraton.”



(Evans 3-23-2006)

Drawing a conclusion that friendship was never so disowned so conveniently it just happened.

Neither Tiffany or Miss Strangeworth will grow in self-understanding about the way they elect to relate to others any more than General Zaroff, Young Goodman Brown, or Calvin’s vaporous cloud will. Appropriately, the name “Strangeworth” seems to be something of an oxymoron or paradox, and her formal demand for others to be impressed despite her underlying hostility toward them represents an explosive social situation. And so too it goes with the pride of Pitts High; she is above but alone. Prediction: all of these representatives of dramatic irony will metaphorically stand apart in self-assumed glory and yet lie down without a hopeful verse.

CONCLUSION

Let it be said of me that my classroom motto proclaims, “Read like a writer; write like a reader.” The reader will be a high achiever when seeing the mechanical structures of literature and the writer will always mutually reward the reader with helpful conventions to lead to comprehension of deep and complex experience-based themes. Basically, identifying literary devices and rhetorical strategies will grant access to thinking about literature and art almost automatically. May the comics be the pied pipers that lead to the uniting of reader and writer into one.

CREATIVE LESSONS FOR AN INTERWOVEN CURRICULUM

Lesson One: Periodic Writing of Our Own Cartoons

Objective

Employ knowledge to create; move up Bloom’s Ladder

Activities

Challenge the students to brainstorm various activities to create with the knowledge of literary conventions learned from comics. In other words, the students will create original cartoon strips in blank panels. They will naturally show they are engaged in learning and actively applying knowledge and skills. They will use cartoons periodically found in the newspaper as models. A

most excellent idea would be to hand the students a packet of duplicated cartoon strips such as the *Rhymes with Orange* one in “a.” below, and let them decide how each cartoon strip could inspire a project completing their own cartoon in blank panels. The teacher, of course, would have a very clear idea in mind, but would let the student exercise some higher level thinking skills. Also, look at “c” below as a way blank panels could facilitate preparing for a test over literary devices by making flash cards. Their creativity can be surprising at times. Plus, they will be adopting their brainchild as a project.

- a. Using *Rhymes with Orange* from as a model, create a character or characters that give a speech composed of a series of metaphors. The comic strip depicts Herbert with his big nose reading his paper. His broomstick thin wife with suitcase in hand, firmly pronounces, “Herbert, once upon a time you were the rocket of my world. Then you became the stone in my shoe... Now, you’re the sand in my sandwich. Goodbye” (Price 2-28-2006). Here, the teacher is advocating the use of metaphors in future student writing. Metaphors give voice, an essential element for higher scores. Imagine dramatic situations. Picture them in cartoon style. Visualize the metaphors making waves. Remember that the metaphor compares the known with the unknown so that the unknown will become a familiar as the known. One character will let the other know how he or she feels about him or her. The second character may want to respond in like fashion giving the first person an assessment about how he or she feels about him or her at that moment. Make a list of possible emotions that could be expressed, depending on the relationship.
- b. Using a graphic novel or a particular Funky Winkerbean adventure as an example, let the students demonstrate their comprehension of a scene in *Julius Caesar* by redramatizing it in a cartoon strip. Evoke their imagination by suggesting that the different characters could be different kinds of dogs: a Dalmatian, a schnauzer, a cocker spaniel, and so on. Another possibility would be for the conspirators to be one kind of animal and the followers of Anthony another species. Encourage close ups and panoramics as seen in a particular series of a cartoon strip on a particular theme. Translate the language so it will be appropriate to the funny way you depict the story. Brutus could be a rap star and Mark Anthony a country and western singer. Brainstorm with the students about variations in time and place. Remind the students that they must condense and must therefore focus on the dialogue and actions that most helped Shakespeare express meaning. Suggest that they look for archetypal actions, characters, and statements. Tell them you expect to see the conventions.
- c. Absolutely, recall or imagine a person being the last to learn some crucial information and thus making a fool out of him or herself. Make the incident a cartoon strip. In fact, have the students make a flash card with the name of a literary device on one side and a definition and a self-drawn cartoon on the other to help them prepare for a test over literary devices. With permission, the cartoon could be from a short story instead of a personal or imagined experience.
- d. Encourage the students to put a lot of foreshadowing into a suspenseful story that could happen at your school. Did someone try to steal someone else’s homework? Did a friend really need to send a note to a friend with an important message and go to elaborate lengths to keep from getting caught? Did you prevent someone from tagging your locker or eating your fries? Include mood in the setting of the story. Show it all in cartoon panels.
- e. Write a haiku or short poem about a favorite comic or short story and put a few lines in each panel with an illustration. Highlight the conventions of poetry. For example, David Gilbert periodically stages a haiku illustrated with the character of his *Buckles* series. “Dog Haiku

#31” shows what can be done with alliteration in a haiku: White walks, weathered ways, / Windy whistles, water wands. / Winter Wonderland!” (Gilbert 12-15-2005) Most of the Haikus are humorous, but number thirty-one is – what else? – whimsical with the Buckles family contentedly strolling in the snow. The picture empowers the words with mood and tone.

- f. Using *Shortcuts* as an example, show the students how they can give a fun and stylistic report on an individually chosen character from the *Odyssey*. Students can show how the story reveals and uses the character traits as well as fascinating details and traditions about the character.
- g. Personify the different kinds of conflict. Have them meet in a comic strip and discuss a topic. The topic could be an argument or brawl over who is the most important in a story from the text such as “The Plainswoman.”
- h. Produce a comic strip that uses unique verbal irony in one of the panels. Try to think of an incident in real life or one that could have happened. Ask the students to keep in mind using the panels in a set of flash cards made to help study for a test over literary terms.

Invite the students to pick a project from their list combined with this one and meet with you to compose a rubric or self-evaluation before they start. They complete the comic strip and earn a grade as cool as their originality.

Lesson Two: Journal Entries for Comic to Literature

Objective

Keep goals in mind and solidify identifying and applying the literary terms.

Activities

Write every day and grow comfortable with the habit.

Types of Journal Entries by active reading skills, which I classify as a strategy and a literary term for purposes of learning how to get the most out of a work of art:

- a. Connect. Associate with the tone or mood. The student can write about a time they were scared or under stress before reading “The Most Dangerous Game” and or a *Funky Winkerbean* cartoon. The student will be ready to identify with the situation in the art and to make comparisons.
- b. Clarify. Write about a simile in a cartoon and then analyze how it helps the artist create an experience. How would the work of art be different without the simile? Did the simile help give a feeling? Prove a point? A recently read story, poem, or essay may have featured a simile; see if they will take the bait and include this in their writing. Also, the simile in literature may ideally follow the journal writing about a simile in a cartoon.
- c. Predict. Read a comic that is part of a series of strips giving a longer story. Try to figure out what will happen next and how the selection might end. Then, show the next strip or panel and see how the guesses connected something at the beginning with something at the end. Of course, point out that the challenge is not to be correct, but to be able to base the prediction on some hint or foreshadowing. Note that the predictions should be justifiable in some way. Caution the students that a clever writer will sometimes give true but misleading information. A good choice would be to practice with *Luann* and follow up more formally with “The Necklace.” Keep predicting how the protagonist or antagonist will act next at various points

in the rising action and what will follow the climax in the falling action. Predict. Read. Evaluate. Predict. Read. Evaluate.

- d. Visualize by drawing the poem or story into cartoon panels blocked out in the journal. Read together and point out some images (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch) and ask them to find or infer others. The imaginative inference is important. A close reading should also let you point out some onomatopoeia and the students find other examples or make imaginative inferences. The issue of visualization has reached a fever pitch with the lack of mental pictures in the mind of a person during reading being targeted as a serious liability. The lack of mental pictures can be addressed with a journal entry – a cartoon strip – that puts pictures with the descriptive details. Adjusting the student to see cartoons as snapshots of stories or parts of stories is a hopeful step toward visualizing pictures while reading literature. Reading comics with the pictures there can be an opportunistic step toward seeing pictures when only the words are there.
- e. Question. Stop midway through a comic series such as one in *Zits* and in a story such as “The Sniper.” Ask the students to write about possible reasons behind events and characters’ feelings. This can help the student feel closer to the experience in the work of art. The student could orally practice questioning with *Zits* or *Baldo* and move from guided practice to writing question about what is happening in the “Sniper.”
- f. Evaluate. Form opinions after reading *Calvin and Hobbes* or *Black Boy*. A theme is the exploration of an idea. The student can move toward maturity in making judgments if they develop their own ideas about characters and events. Ask the students what their mother or pastor would think about the problem and the person with the problem. Ask what they would think in that situation. If the student does not have a perspective, a baseline of beliefs interacting with life, they are soon to be standing on thin air and may never be able to form a thesis statement or a posture for dealing with a pilgrimage through life.
- g. Associate. Discuss in the journal how we are like Calvin in a cartoon or Elizabeth in “Marigolds.” The students have to live in the first decade of 2000 in some room like 217 at Waltrip Senior High School. They are limited to the time and place of the circumstances of their birth, but unlimited in possible experiences if they travel with literary characters. Literature can enrich where before there were a limited number of experiences. This and other journals could be done as a group discusses possible answers.
- h. Put literary terms into appositive sentences. This will help the terms be owned by the student. The teacher can provide a template. A collaborative effort could smooth the initiation, execution and evaluation of the product. The first attempts and the final product make a journal entry.
- i. Summarize the specifics of the day’s literary term studied in a journal entry. Point out that “we learned about tone” does not tell anything worth remembering about what you learned. The students can’t formulate a thesis statement if they can’t paraphrase and summarize. Journals can be done at the beginning, but it breaks up the paradigm if they sometimes happen at the end of the class. It is good if this happens frequently and if the students know they are accountable at the end of the day.

Lesson 3: A Study Quiz

Objective: Demonstrate readiness to recognize and apply literary terms to everyday reading and writing the classroom and in life. Plus, demonstrate the ability to refresh and revive knowledge and skills over a long period of time.

Activity: Prepare vocabulary flash cards to learn and maintain the definitions of literary terms, strategies, and rhetorical conventions over a long period of time.

- a. The students will cut cartoons out of the newspaper that prove to be examples of literary terms, such as the *Rhymes with Orange* example of metaphor given above. The name of the literary device can be printed next to the title of the cartoon series.
- b. The students can paste or staple the cartoon onto the paper, tag board, or card used to make the flash card.
- c. The students can print the definition of the literary term above the cartoon. I would suggest putting the definition in an appositive sentence as discussed above in “h.” of lesson plan two.
- d. The students can print the term on the other side of the flash card. Here, the students could also do any number of things. There could be a drawing of something that would help the student remember the definition. Of course, I would immediately suggest that the student draw their own cartoon which uses the literary term. Certainly, there appear to be any number of model vocabulary strategies being presented in educational forums that would suggest what could go on the flash card. The teacher or the teacher and the students could decide.

Activity: Collect many examples of cartoons from the newspaper that use a particular literary device. Draw or obtain a picture of a story, poem, or play that uses the device and paste it with the cartoons on oversized paper or poster board collage style. Publish on the wall of the classroom.

Activity: Previous to the consistent and continuing mini-lessons with prompts from the comics, the students remained mute, unable to recall the definitions well enough to identify the author’s technical use of literary devices and conventions; furthermore, this muteness limited the ability to think about the theme, an even more disturbing dilemma. Without coaching, there will plainly be no progress toward using the terms to make an analysis, arrive at an understanding, and go on to the mythical and universal levels of interpretation – leaving the individual stranded with no ability to move beyond simply retelling the story. Now a foundation of the writers’ tools having been poured comically, the teacher can think about a traditional study test. This test can be built one definition at a time with no real end to the accumulation of test questions until it is time for the final exam. Along the way, there can be as many periodic quizzes as appropriate. Of course, having taught the unit, I have the final test, which can therefore be used as a pretest if so desired. The teacher can prepare the periodic quizzes and the literary definitions as part of the final on a test-making program that will shuffle the order of the questions and the order of the answer choices. The program of choice can allow the selection of particular questions from a bank of possible questions. Again, the study test can be used in classroom review activities such as a spelling bee type contest or – better still – a team competition. I now use a test-making program available on the Internet that can be found at www.easytestmaker.com. Below are some of my questions chosen at random.

The Study Quiz

1. A helpful _____, a useful reference to something well known, enriches our understanding.
- a. allegory
 - b. epiphany
 - c. appositive
 - d. metaphor
 - e. allusion

Ans. = e

2. The consistently conflicting _____, the opposing character or force, plays a significant role in developing the main idea.
- a. diction
 - b. protagonist
 - c. human versus human
 - d. climax
 - e. antagonist

Ans. = e

3. A(n) _____ character, a fully developed creation of the author, reveals many aspects, just as someone we know well in real life.
- a. simile
 - b. allusive
 - c. round
 - d. Santa Clause type
 - e. ironic

Ans. = c

4. The time and place, the _____ of the story, contributes mood to shape the reader's response.
- a. personification
 - b. exposition
 - c. setting
 - d. tone
 - e. diction

Ans. = c

5. The events in a story that move the plot along by adding complications in a chain of cause and effect, the rising _____, is often the longest part of the plot.
- a. narrator
 - b. tone
 - c. dramatic irony
 - d. action
 - e. generating circumstances

Ans. = d

6. Built around conflict, an intriguing _____, a complete chain of cause and effect events, rises and falls as it tells the story from beginning to end.
- a. metaphor
 - b. plot
 - c. personification
 - d. irony
 - e. allusion

Ans. = b

7. A creative _____, a clever comparison between two things unlike but with something in common, makes the unknown as familiar as the known without using "like" or "as."
- a. simile
 - b. irony
 - c. foreshadowing
 - d. allegory
 - e. metaphor

Ans. = e

8. Carefully crafted _____, intense curiosity about what will happen next, keeps the reader reading for more hints.
- a. conflict
 - b. roundness
 - c. settings
 - d. suspense
 - e. irony

Ans. = d

9. The active reader will probe, inquire, and _____ to get the most out of a story or any work of art.
- a. think
 - b. question
 - c. nap
 - d. connect
 - e. visualize

Ans. = b

10. Finding the theme comes easier if the reader associates, compares, recalls, and _____ with the characters, settings, and conflicts for understanding.
- a. predicts
 - b. clarifies
 - c. visualizes
 - d. evaluates
 - e. connects

Ans. = e

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- Jackson, Shirley. "The Possibility of Evil." *In The Language of Literature*, ninth grade edition. Evanston, Illinois: McDougal Littell, 2000, pp. 173-81.
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- Pastis, Stephan. *Pearls before Swine*. Comics.com/archives, 4-24-2006. <<http://www.comics.com>>.
- Piraro, Dan. *Bizarro*. Dailyink.com/archives, 3-21-2006. <<http://www.dailyink.com>>.
- Price, Hilary. *Rhymes with Orange*. Dailyink.com/archives, 2-28-2006. <<http://www.dailyink.com>>.
- Watterson, Bill. *There's Treasure Everywhere*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1996.

Supplemental Sources

The real annotated Bibliography rests in room 217 at Waltrip Senior High in a big box where hundreds of comics mostly cut out of the *Houston Chronicle* are filed by the literary convention they represent. However, below are beloved sources that have been thumbed through as part of a classroom library.

- Connell, Richard. "The Most Dangerous Game." *The Language of Literature*, ninth grade edition. Evanston, Illinois: McDougal Littell, 2000. pp. 40-57.
This is the textbook for ninth grade English and therefore the source for short stories. The unit is student orientated and the text is the logical reference book. "The Most Dangerous Game" is a classic of conflict, suspense, and prediction. All students love an adventure story, males in particular.
- Jackson, Shirley. "The Possibility of Evil." *In The Language of Literature*, ninth grade edition. Evanston, Illinois: McDougal Littell, 2000, pp. 173-181.
This story is in the tradition of "Young Goodman Brown." It is a great, psychological study that will advance the student's experiences with the inner working of the mind.
- Larson, Gary. *The Far Side Gallery*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1984.
Beside reading material does not get any better. Something fresh and startling can get the attention of the distracted teen-ager.
- . *The Far Side Gallery 2*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1986.
This book inspired me to share laughter with my students. Laugh and the whole world laughs with you.
- . *The Far Side Gallery 3*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1988.
Herein lies the material that inspired me to do the unit with my students. Comics make an impression that is not soon forgotten.
- . *The Far Side Gallery 4*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1993.
You have not heard this one. The students are lacking in universal experiences outside the block where they live. Laughter can gently introduce them to new thoughts.
- . *The Far Side Gallery 5*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1995.
Irony lives here with deformed archetypes. Look at all the variations and infer the pattern.
- Watterson, Bill. *The Calvin and Hobbes Lazy Sunday Book*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1989.
Keep this resource book handy. It will keep you laughing and researching for the unit.

- . *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1995.
You will want to read and teach the whole book to your classes. They will never grow tired of this mischief.
- . *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1988.
What a great way to connect with youth! We should not have forgotten what it was like to be young.
- . *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1994.
Almost every page is a teaching aid. You won't have trouble connecting these comics with your textbook.
- . *The Indispensable Calvin and Hobbes*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1992.
The situations easily relate to episodes in literature. Bait them with a chuckle, and they will follow you into the textbook.
- . *It's a Magical World*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1996.
Invest in a gateway that opens into the student mind. It is full of the turns and twists that literature uses.
- . *The Revenge of the Baby-Sat*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1991.
Reading grows out of the pleasure it provides. Let the students develop an instinctive belief that what is in between the covers of a book is desirable.
- . *Sunday Pages 1985-1995*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2001.
If only my ninth grade teacher had read this book, I would not have taken so long to fall in love with the written word.
- . *There's Treasure Everywhere*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1996.
Stand in awe of the Bible for teaching comics and literature. The title says it all.
- . *Weirdos from Another Planet*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1990.
Read this book and stay young. No wonder the students love every page.

Web Sources

<Comics.com>.

All comics are archived on one of three web sites. This one makes user-friendly sound like an understatement. All are about the same; you log on and you never want to log off. New comics that are just being launched can be found on all three sites. All three sites allow a member to print any comic archived.

<Dailyink.com>.

Like the other members of the comic trinity of comic website, this one opens up unlimited resources for the enthusiastic. Each artist associated with this web site has an archive with a comic for each day he or she was published in the funny papers. One can email any archived comic to anyone who has an e-mail address.

<Mycomics.com>.

On these sites can be found any comic that has been published in a newspaper. Some artists no longer publish, but their works during their active period are often archived on one of the sites. One can also find comics that may not be published in a local newspaper. The sites have some information about the artists.

Media Sources

The Houston Chronicle.

The *Chronicle* remains the source for comics for the majority of people. They have a department called Chronicle in Education. The CIE will provide class sets of newspapers, which makes using comics practical and convenient. It is the first step in building a file of comics for every convention.