MAKERS AND USERS OF KNOWLEDGE: LITERARY RE-CREATION IN THE CLASSROOM

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I'm not going to do it. I'm going to do it. I'm not going to do it. I'm going to do it. I'm not going to do it. I'm going to do it late. I'm not going to do it. I have to do it.

Staying true to form, like too many a freshman's nightmare; as a wrongly convicted criminal who solely waited out his last hours on death row, only to be escorted by a cluster of lifeless, blankfaced wardens, jailers, and priest to the non-forgiving, electrical chair of death. It's 6:31 p.m., Sunday night, with a six page short 'story essay' due for English 101, 11:00 a.m. Monday morning, sixteen and a half hours away, and it looks as if the only thing going to English 101 with Joe is a cluster of lifeless, blankfaced paper, minus a priest.

These are the words of a composition student of mine some four years ago. I remember wading through endless pages of neatly typed but colorless prose on such topics as "Gothic Elements in 'A Rose for Emily'" and "Initiation into Maturity in 'Barn Burning'" and then suddenly coming across a single sheet of lined paper with the above words carefully printed and bearing the title "Empty Page." I was struck by the vitality of the writing, the intensity of feeling, the sense of personal voice,

the graphic images, the poetic repetition of phrases—above all, by the vivid metaphor of the student writer as a wrongly convicted criminal waiting out his last hours on death row. I asked Joe to come see me during office hours so that we could discuss his essay, but he never returned to my class.

I haven't seen Joe in four years, yet his portrayal of the student/teacher relationship still haunts me. Teachers as wardens and guards, unforgiving correction officers wielding red pens, punishing with poor grades—controlling, intimidating. Priests sermonizing, giving communion, administering last rites.

Overcoming Restraints

Pondering the contrast of the teacher as governor vs. facilitator has led me to reassess the assignments I give in my composition and literature courses, especially the conventional close reading of a literary work. Teachers are well aware of the common problem of student critical analyses: unengaged prose which lacks a developed thesis and personal voice, a confusion of description with interpretation, and vast claims unbacked by specificity. Is this verbal Muzak solely the fault of novice writers or also that of teachers whose approach to analyzing a work of literature fosters generic responses?

I am dismayed that so many instructors steeped in recent post-structuralist and reader-response theories, which stress multiplicity in literary interpretation (see Eagleton; Lynn; Tompkins), invariably fall back on the reductive tenets of New Criticism. How often do we focus solely on the formal elements of a text, disregarding authorial motive and historical context—letting students in on hidden meanings, rather than helping them explore subjective responses and various social and cultural factors shaping their perceptions? No wonder students tend to think that teachers create meanings out of thin air. Should we be surprised that when students write their own critical analyses, they face the daunting task of creating similar literary sleights of hand, which seem the only way to reveal "objective" truth? Intimidation and disinterest lead to conventional subjects, styles, voices, and forms.

One of the culprits in producing this safe, formulaic prose is

the traditional close reading assignment, still dominating most undergraduate literature classes, and taking several forms: a line-by-line textual explication, an analysis of a literary element and how it functions in and relates to the whole, and a comparison between two literary works, usually in terms of character, theme and effect.[1] Reader-centered approaches to literature that explore subjective responses and what in the text evoked them are often looked down upon as less "rigorous" and "critical" than the sacrosanct close reading. More creative responses to a work of literature (for example, writing a series of imagined diary entries of a particular character or responding to an author in letter form) are also often seen as a threat to engaged readings. Need this be the case? Is the close reading, which many students view as a kind of mental constipation, necessarily the best way to encourage critical skills?

To overcome the sense of intimidation and restriction associated with literary criticism, I am continually experimenting with projects which draw students into the subjective resonance of a text and make the writing experience more visceral. Conventional close readings of literature tend to evoke passive, superficial responses because they discourage creativity, foster hardly any sense of a vested interest, and generate little emotional response. In my experience, students become much more actively involved in projects which blur the artificial distinction between "expository" and "creative." Such projects cultivate critical analysis and then use it as a springboard for personal expression. They stress not just the investigation but the *application* of ideas, or, as Schriner and Willen put it, "affirm the roles of the students as both makers and users of knowledge" (232).

What kind of literary "analysis" can help students interact with a text while developing logical, critical, *and* creative thinking skills? What kind of assignment can encourage diversity and risk taking and result in more lively, committed prose? Most importantly, what kind of venture can help liberate students from the oppression that Joe so vividly described above, and turn a chore into a provocative experience? Let me suggest one possibility.

Literary Re-creation

Imagine you are involved in a film adaptation of one of the short stories, novels, or plays we have read this semester. You are the director, screenwriter, cinematographer, filmscorer, costume designer, or any other member of the film team. How do you see your role in adapting the literary work to the screen? What is the intent of the original, and how will you try to reflect it in the film? Make sure that with any role you assume, you focus on both (1) the general aims, means, or effects of the original and (2) a particular scene in the text.

If you are the director, try to communicate your personal vision of the film and any artistic, technical, financial or other issues you are concerned with. You might want to focus on the types of changes you will be making in the film and why (commercial pressures? aesthetic preferences? differences in the nature of the media?). What will you emphasize, deemphasize, add and delete (characters, dialogue, action, themes, etc.)? Be sure to consider the effects of the changes and why you are making them. You might also wish to develop a new setting for the the text, placing the action in a different time and place. While preserving the spirit of the original, try to place your own stamp on the film version.

If you are the screenwriter, you can either (1) discuss such issues as what you will change and why, how you will try to externalize the thoughts and feelings of the original through action, dialogue, etc., and what major themes you will incorporate and how (again referring to a specific scene) or (2) write part of the actual screenplay for a particular scene and then discuss what you have done and why.

As a filmscorer, how will you use music—or as cinematographer how will you use lighting, color, camera techniques, composition and design—to enhance the plot, rhythm, themes, tone, characters, and figurative elements of the original?

I often assign this project near the end of the semester in

both my composition and literature classes. Although extensive preparation is not necessary (I've gotten many provocative responses with little or no prior discussion), analyzing several film adaptations of literary works earlier in the semester introduces students to similarities and differences between literature and film as narrative modes and gets them thinking about the creative and critical process of adapting a work of literature to the screen (see Boyum; Gardner; McDougal; Mast; Ross).[2] Students need not know anything per se about film technique in assuming the above roles. I have occasionally discussed such basic devices as shots, cut, transitions, pacing, and composition (see Dick; Giannetti), but I tend to deemphasize film technique, concentrating in general on how film captures moods and externalizes thoughts and feelings through, for example, action, dialogue and music.

I have been using this project over the past four years to supplement more traditional critical analysis. I have found it neither to threaten close reading skills nor to foster unbridled subjectivism, but to engage students in the fabric of a literary text and enhance critical and creative response. Assuming the roles of participants in the filmmaking process encourages writing diverse in subject matter, interpretation, form and style and helps students develop a sense of voice.[3] Most importantly, students enjoy the freedom the project allows; they are no longer walking a tightrope between teacher-imposed and self-initiated inquiry.

This freedom to experiment, however, does not mean that anything goes. Students must still present their arguments as forcefully as possible, and, to counteract the tendency to remain on a general plane, focus on a particular scene in the original text. Imagining how this scene would best be transferred to the screen encourages students to interact with the text, formulating hypotheses, evaluating intentions and drawing inferences. Rather than diverting attention from the literary work, participating in film adaptations encourages students to go back to the text and view it from new perspectives.

Narrative Technique

These new angles of vision not only result in more impassioned writing, but also enhance an interdisciplinary approach to the arts in which students learn about the structural, creative, and aesthetic qualities of two narrative media. As students anticipate the problems of translating one medium into another, they gain a sense of the limits and possibilities of both, as well as the strategies and techniques writers and filmmakers use to organize and express their ideas. Exploring firsthand the process of adaptation brings to life such abstract literary terms as point of view, tone, style, imagery, symbol, and myth.

Creating literary adaptation also focuses attention on narrative structure. Student directors and screenwriters are inevitably confronted with decisions about narrative patterns: "classical" paradigms (situation, conflict, climax, denouement); "realistic" or "slice-of-life" narratives with looser, more discursive plot lines that avoid clear-cut conflicts; and "expressionistic" sequences with psychological distensions and contractions in time, disruptions of traditional relationships between cause and effect, and portrayals of unconscious mental processes and states (see Cohen; Morrissette; Giannetti 304-316). As students investigate linear and nonlinear narrative structures, they come head to head with questions of dramatic unity, logic, probability, motivation, convention and contrivance. Making practical and aesthetic decisions about patterns of storytelling sheds special light on relationships between content and form and helps students become more sensitive to the "how's" vs. the "what's" of art. Students are no longer passively isolating themes and symbols, but actively pursuing connections between theme, structure, style and mood.

By assuming film roles, students are thus encouraged to consider a number of challenging questions: What do literature and film have in common as narrative media and artistic expressions? How are they unique? What are the general problems in adapting a literary work to the screen? What is meant by an adaptation being "faithful to the spirit" of the original, and how it can "violate the intent" of the literary work? What types of relationships are possible between a literary work

and film adaptation? How do the terms "translation," "interpretation," and "inspiration" relate to the process of adaptation? What is the potential of the written word vs. visual/aural image to evoke thoughts, feelings, and sensations, reveal states of consciousness (such as dreams, memories and imagination), create figures of speech, and communicate abstract ideas? In what ways can a film create structural, stylistic, and thematic analogies to the original? To what extent is it possible to externalize an internal monologue through dialogue, action and other visual/aural means? What is the aesthetic difference between imaginative and visual forms of "seeing"? How do literature and film function as mirrors of cultural, socioeconomic, and political change?

Some might argue that such demanding questions are better left to literary and film scholars, perhaps to be addressed in a graduate seminar, but rarely in a first-year literature course. My experiences lead me to disagree. Of course, presenting these questions to students in abstract list form could prove overwhelming. But if students are left to their own devices, they inevitably struggle with these types of questions—perhaps not in the same language, but certainly in the same spirit. Let me provide some examples of how students approach these questions and of the variety in form, subject, interpretation, and style that the project inspires.

Student Adaptations

Students continually surprise me with their creative responses. I've received photographs accompanying discussion of literary adaptation (with captions describing location, set design, and camera angles); cassette recordings of music, sound effects, and dramatic readings; musical scores; screenplays; and storyboards (individual frame drawings of shots, with dialogue and description of action, much like comic strips). A current composition student of mine is even working on a video adaptation of a short story to be submitted with his written project.

I say "written project" instead of "essay" because I am not interested in students following some predetermined form or

narrative stance, but rather in experimenting with the process of literary adaptation in whatever manner they see fit. As a result, in addition to more traditional analyses, I've received letters between members of the film production team, extended journal entries of directors and actors, interviews, descriptions of press conferences, and film reviews. Students have also not limited themselves to the film roles listed in the project handout, but have taken on the duties of producer, art director, casting director, film editor, sound editor, makeup artist, and publicity agent (see Bone and Johnson).

One of the issues students are often concerned with first is film genre. What category of film—western, adventure, horror, science fiction, documentary, avant-garde, and so on—with its own set of conventions in style, subject matter, and character would best capture the spirit of the original? Listen to one student's novel suggestion of using the three dimensional medium of clay animation ("claymation") as the basis of her film adaptation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper":

> This story is filled with vivid violent action, most of which takes place in the narrator's warped imagination. If I were to tell this story on film, I would use the medium of clay animation. I have seen some beautiful work done with this medium, and it is extremely well-suited for creating the dreamlike, imaginary world that the narrator lives in. I feel that if I were to rely on live actors and Hollywood special effects, the story would come off as contrived, the emphasis being on the effects and not on the story.

After discussing the reason for the narrator's mental deterioration, the student went on to describe in detail how she would visualize the imaginative world of the story on the screen.

Several other students have experimented with one of the most influential film "genres" of the past decade: music videos. One student developed a video based on John Keat's sonnet "When I Have Fears" since he was so moved by the following lines:

When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Huge cloudy symbols of high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows with the magic hand of chance. . . .

His main character, a composer, inspired by the "faery power of unreflecting love," overcomes doubts about his artistic potential and, working feverishly through most of the night, wakes up in the morning with dozens of sheets of "rich-garnered" music scattered about the floor.

Another student directed a music video of an imagined new hit single ("Hot Babes") by the rock group "Motley Crue," based on John Updike's story "A&P":

> I chose this story because it contains the classic mental video framework: suffering teenworker hassled by authority figure, boy hypnotized by sudden appearance of sexy maidens, boy turns on authority figure, transforms from nerd to stud, and joins the voluptuous babes.

A liberal adaptation to say the least, but one which was informed by two central issues of the original: male chauvinism and character transformation ("coming-of-age").

Many other students have similarly used the work of literature as a means to explore personal and social issues. I remember two projects in particular, both inspired by poems. One was an autobiographical version of Dylan Thomas' "Do not go gentle into that good night." Set in a hospital room and using flashbacks, the film explored the relationship between a son and his dying father, a former construction worker, and what each saw as constituting a fulfilled life. The other project, a film version of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," traced the thoughts and feelings of a young man as he walked one October night through "half-deserted streets," encountering assorted characters, stopping off at a brothel, and finally making his way to a high cliff with the sea below. Flirting with suicide, the man suddenly realized that there were things in life he still wished to accomplish, and, with the voice of the sea in his ear, slowly headed home. During an office hour, the student told me that his project was an attempt to

recreate the loneliness, isolation, and search for meaning that he sensed in the poem and that he had also been experiencing as a first-year college student.

A third student developed a similarly "loose" adaptation to explore not personal issues but two increasingly serious social problems: drug use and gang violence. Using Ambrose Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," this student constructed a narrative based on a similar escapist fantasy, set not in the South during the Civil War, but in Boston in 1990. A member of one gang on another's turf has a gun held to his head and is told he has ten seconds to live. During that time, he imagines an heroic escape through the streets of Boston, dodging missiles on all sides, only to arrive home and be struck down by a bullet to the head. In his analysis of the adaptation, the student discussed his attempt to create cinematic parallels to what he perceived as narrative, stylistic, and psychological "dissonances" in the original story: those actions, thoughts, and feelings which seem slightly out of place in the real world, suggesting rather the realm of imagination. I was captivated by the student's ability to reflect through pictures and music the ironic juxtapositions of objective and subjective point of view in the original.

Of course, all projects are not as "liberal" as the ones just described; many students stick close to the text, trying through dialogue, cinematography, and music to reflect as accurately as possible the moods, themes, and figurative techniques of the original. One student, for example, recently discussed how she would use music (alternative acoustic and electronic textures) and visual changes in weather to capture the ambiguous mood of Shadrack's final march to the river with the residents of Bottom in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*: a mood, as the student put it, "firmly rooted in the bright and jubilant sunshine of that morning, but still swaying in the wind of sorrow and despair." She went on to explore the symbolic significance of the march ("repression, unity, struggle, and release") and how she saw it as mirroring the relationship between the two main characters of the novel, Sula and Nel.

Another student focused on the "cinematic quality" of Katherine Anne Porter's short novel *Noon Wine*—its visual power and "panning" techniques— and how he, as

cinematographer, would try to recreate the dreamlike atmosphere of the novel and its eerie sense of stasis and fatality:

> As the novel opens up, the camera focuses on the Thompsons' milk house. The boards which make up its exterior walls are spaced with wide cracks between them, allowing light to filter through. They are unpainted and weatherbeaten, conveying a sense of disrepair. As the camera pans back to take in more of the barn, we see it overgrown with bushes and weeds. The skeletal remains of an old plow lie to the side—rusted, abandoned. A jungle of weeds and grasses snake their way around and up through the ribs of the neglected machine. Its posture gives it an almost carcass-like quality.

Cinematic translation has allowed this student to explore the same issues of tone and imagery that he might have in traditional critical analysis, but in a more creative and graphic manner. The detached narrative stance of conventional close reading has given way to a more engaged voice.

A third student interested in close adaptation directed a film version of William Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily," concentrating on the metaphorical potential of words vs. visual/aural images. Viewing his main challenge as developing cinematic equivalents of literary figures of speech, as well as capturing the understatement, ambiguity, and irony of the original, he aptly concluded:

> As director, I am interested in the aspect of the unknown in a work of art—the implicit over the explicit. A director has to be careful to reproduce, as far as possible, that author's own intentions and descriptions, while at the same time leaving the subtlety and realm of the unknown in the work. . . . A work of literature leaves a lot to the imagination, whereby the reader fills in the gaps with his own speculation, and as an end result draws a picture that satisfies his own intellectual instincts. Literature is not just the art of the author; it also requires that the reader be a connoisseur of the art, that is, an

artist too. . . .

An elegant description of reader-response ("reception") theory! Readers actively participating in the creation of meaning, constructing and revising hypotheses, making implicit connections, drawing inferences, filling in gaps, testing hunches—generating multiple valid interpretations of a single text (see Eagleton 76-77).

It is precisely the two elements mentioned in the above quote—a director's remaining faithful to the contents and themes of the original, while allowing the viewer imaginative freedom—which one student saw as so woefully lacking in Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* that he decided to work on his own screenplay.[4] What especially bothered this student was Spielberg's Hollywood sanitation of the novel: his downplaying the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug and his expunging the novel's frank discussions of sexuality, lovemaking, rape, and incest. The student thus took what he considered a pivotal point in Celie's character development—her first sexual encounter with Shug—and wrote a screenplay of the letter which described it. Incorporating dialogue from several earlier letters and adding some of his own, the student tried to portray Celie's first sexual experience with another woman as a "beautiful erotic awakening." After flashing back to Pa raping Celie when she was 14, the screenplay presented an extended lovemaking scene between Celie and Shug, which used camera angles and lighting to create an "air of intimacy and unpolished romance." Without being overly graphic, that is, by walking the fine line between implicit and explicit mentioned earlier, the student elegantly captured "a feeling of being swept up in the confusion of passion."

Humane Classrooms

In a recent review of literary theory, James C. Raymond urges teachers to develop a "post-structural awareness" in their classrooms—an approach which avoids "the illusion that literature is a completely objective artifact . . . from which

readers can extract a single proper meaning" (13). Encouraging students to explore their subjective reactions to literary works, as well as the cultural and political factors conditioning their perceptions, creates a "much more humane classroom" (14) in which students come to enjoy reading and analyzing literature.

Far too often, teachers are more concerned with elucidating the formal elements of a work of literature and introducing literary concepts than with developing activities which draw students into a text, encouraging multiple readings, and making critical analysis more rewarding. Approaching a literary work as an anatomical dissection in which students carefully peel away layer after layer to reveal essential structures beneath turns the study of literature into an arduous task rather than a creative adventure.

Writing about literature need not be a sterile explication of arcane detail. I have described only one of many possible projects which personalize critical analysis, stimulate reluctant readers and writers, and encourage a committed stance. In these endeavors students are no longer merely reacting to literature but "reenacting" it—no longer passively observing, but actively participating in a continuing process of critical and creative exploration. Through literary re-creation, students learn that writing about literature is not something to be feared—not a one-shot recitation of correct answers, but an ongoing dialogue in which serious discussion embraces humor, spontaneity, and imagination. Writing does not have to be the stultifying, "blankfaced" process that Joe described at the beginning of this essay; it can be filled with life, personal expression, and self-discovery. I think he knew this all along.

NOTES

[1]I am not questioning the value of such assignments in fostering critical inquiry; however, in my experience, they rarely spark the interest of students, especially that of non-English majors. I am not advocating the abandonment of critical analysis, but its cultivation in fresh soil.

[2]To help identify and locate film adaptations of literary works, see Enser and Langman.

[3]For a discussion of projects involving similar types of "dependent authorship," see Adams. In this article, the author describes imaginative tasks in which students take on the role of author, including reconstructions, additions to the text, altered endings, dreams and epilogues.

[4]For a succinct discussion of the nature and format of screenwriting, see Dick 192-200.

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