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ABSTRACT

A literature course entitled "The Victorian Illustrated Book: A Marriage of Image and Word," offered at Skidmore College in New York, was designed to help students make connections between art and literature. Based on the premise that illustrations in Victorian books can be "decoded" much like a written text, students were introduced to illustrations from Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist" and Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" and spent time examining the illustrations to determine their faithfulness to the text and how they elaborated upon the narrative. Students also read research that familiarized them with Victorian artistic concerns, such as the language of symbols in artwork, and the Victorian preoccupation with the pastoral, death, and the family. An assignment called for students to examine Dante Gabriel Rosetti's painting "Found" and decode its symbols. More successful students learned not only to decode individual symbols but make ideational connections by seeing the symbols as a whole, as a "text" to be read. During the second month of the course, students were able to see how an illustration highlights a text or provides essential information. As the course neared its end, students had progressed to a point where most easily made ideational connections between the arts, and occasionally made insightful connections between Victorian and modern concerns. The nature of this course seems to encourage students to make a full range of connections. (JC)

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Connection Making Between The Sister Arts

Liberal Studies III courses in Skidmore's new curriculum explore the complementary role between the arts and promote critical analysis ultimately to enhance aesthetic appreciation. The title of my course--"The Victorian Illustrated Book: A Marriage of Image and Word"--emphasizes the complementary role of literature and the visual arts in the nineteenth century. The marriage metaphor advances that artists and authors wed their arts in a single form for better or for worse. Designing this course, I had envisioned that my students would also wed concepts from their freshman foundation course, LS I, to these ideas. I had hoped to encourage this connection by including in my syllabus works by an author and a philosopher students had encountered in Liberal Studies I; LS I introduces students to Plato's Crito and Dickens' Hard Times, and my LS III course presents them with the Phaedrus and Oliver Twist. In addition, LS I students had been asked to write a paper on topics including what elements other than facts and theories determine how we learn and what we claim to know. Many of these ideas raised on the nature of learning and the human experience are relevent to our two week unit on the educational and social role of illustration in Oliver Twist.

In class discussions not one of my seventeen students made reference to ideas in the LS I curriculum or this particular

paper topic when we discussed illustration as a way of learning about a topic if the words eluded an undereducated Victorian reader. Not one of my students referred to LS I or this paper topic when I pushed the connection by suggesting that three prominent Victorians--William Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and Henry James--referred to illustration as a stronger influence on their learning than ideas presented in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts. Moreover, when we discussed George Cruikshank's and Charles Dickens' desire to improve the "human experience" for the poor and needy of their day, no one referred to LS I or the idea of being human, one of the central themes of the LS I course. I had hoped to push this insightful connection by planting the words "human experience" into our discussion--words from the title of their foundation course which they had taken just a year ago.

The names of the author and philosopher presented in the LS I curriculum did, however, encourage the students to make connections between the LS I and LS III courses. When we read the Phaedrus, several accurately recalled another Platonic dialogue, without mentioning LS I or Plato's ideas per se. When we discussed Oliver Twist, a third of the class remembered that they had read excerpts from another Dickens' book, Hard Times, without referring to LS I or the book's contents. The act of reading selections from Plato and Dickens in two Liberal Studies courses seems to have impressed upon them the importance of the author and philosopher if not the connection between the author's or philosopher's ideas. The fact that every single student in the class had at least glanced at if not poured over the work of

Plato and Dickens created a refreshing cohesiveness amongst the students. The students had a common background which they could correctly line up alongside the current readings in this Liberal Studies III course. Using the terms of our typology, I would call these connections factual rather than ideational or insightful as I had hoped the similarity in authors and ideas would encourage. Later, when I pushed students to see Dickens' social ideas promoting workhouse reform in Oliver Twist in relation to his ideas promoting educational reform in Hard Times, everyone had a common factual background which facilitated their understanding of an important ideational connection, which I admittedly proposed for them.

Although the course is not yet completed, I am pleased to report that there has not been a paucity of student-initiated connection making as these preliminary remarks might suggest. In fact, the contents of this course has encouraged the students to make hollow, factual, ideational, and occasionally insightful connections between literature and the visual arts. In the early weeks of the course I attempted to create an environment which would encourage my students to think like their Victorian ancestors once did and to make connections both between the arts and across the centuries. I held several classes in the Skidmore Library's Rare Book Room so the students could see the Victorian illustrated book in the form which the Victorians saw it--as a serial composed of part issues each containing one or two illustrations. Studying the original Cruikshank illustrations enlivened the Victorian illustrated book for my students.

Reading chapters from Lessing's Laocoon; the Limitations of Poetry and Painting, first translated into English in 1834, familiarized them with the very artistic concerns that Victorian artists were seriously disputing. We learned about the "language of the flowers," a language familiar to the Victorians, and this moved my class to uncode the flowers, fruit, and mythological symbols in the artwork we studied. Learning about the Bible and the Victorians' preoccupation with the pastoral, death, and the family helped my students to think as the Victorians did.

I presented this background on Victorian literature and art to a group of students, half of whom had either taken or were currently taking a genre course in poetry or fiction and were relatively comfortable with the idea that a literary work could evoke images through metaphor and description. Unlike their Victorian ancestors who commonly read illustrations for meaning, students in my course did not readily see the verbal aspect of art during the initial weeks of the course.

The visual and verbal components of the illustrated book have long been recognized as sister arts; in fact, taking liberty with Horace, critics have often pushed the similarites between the arts to equate a poem and a picture. In the nineteenth century both components of the illustrated book are independently narrative and pictorial. Pictures in the tradition of Hogarth are given to storytelling, and narrative in the fashion of Dickens readily encourages visualization. In the most successful matches, such as Dickens and Cruikshank, each art retains its distinctiveness but does transcend its genre bounds to become more like its sister art. Unlike the Victorians, my students are

not accustomed to seeing pictures in adult fiction; most required some initial instruction on how to read "the language of art" in a painting before they could perceive the narrative aspect of art as clearly as the visual aspect of literature and thus perceive the arts as sisters. Thus, instruction on "reading" an image emerged as a prerequisite for connection making. My students' ability to make connections between the arts is dependent upon two types of perceptual skills, which seem to benefit from training: first, to read a text, and, in turn, envision a picture in their mind's eye; and second, to "read" a painting, and, in turn, derive meaning from the arangement of visual objects. I would call the second perceptual skill "visual literacy." Some of the students in the class were more visually literate than others, in part, because they had taken previous courses in Art and Art History which had required them to study a work of art much as the Victorians once did.

To introduce the whole class formally to the idea that a picture is a text that can be "read," I presented several critical readings of the "ut pictura poesis" tradition in the early weeks of the semester. Selected chapters from Martin Meisel's Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England emerged as a pivotal reading for connection making between the arts. Meisel defines the "language of art" as a recognizable universe of discourse. Drawing from the theatre and acting ...anuals of the day, visual vocabulary of the nineteenth century includes theatrical poses, gestures, and expressions, meaning-laden details, and symbols. In class we

practiced "reading" the syntax of a painting in a range of works by Victorian artists, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Richard Redgrave, and William Holman Hunt. I guided their initial readings of paintings, suggesting that they move their eyes from the background to the foreground of the picture to determine where and which kinds of objects and colors appear on canvas.

Following our readings of Victorian paintings, one month into the course, I used a series of paintings by D.G. Rossetti as the basis for the following assignment:

> In this essay offer an analysis of the "language of art" in a Rossetti painting of your choice. As you "read," consider the range of Rossetti's visual vocabulary: the gestures and expressions of his subjects, the arrangement of objects, lines, color, and shading, and, in particular, meaning-laden details. After you uncode the meaning of salient parts of the canvas. discuss these images in relation to each other in order to understand the painting as a whole.

Most of the students analyzing the language of a Rossetti painting had no difficulty breaking the painting into parts and determining the salient visual details. Some could merely lead the viewer's eye across the painting to focus on an important detail but could not describe its significance, thus leaving the potential for connection unfulfilled. Many could analyze one salient detail within a cluster of interrelated details but could only treat it, as they uncoded it, as a single image in isolation rather than a part of a whole image or visual sentence. Several could analyze the whole painting by discussing the meaning produced when examining a cluster of interrelated details on canvas.

A comparison of three students' analytic readings of Rossetti's painting Found (1853-never completed) reveals the range in

students' connection making as they came to to recognize the narrative aspect of painting and so to connect the visual arts to literature. (I refer you to the fourth page of our handout.) Found is a painting given to storytelling, and the images themselves offer a story similar to the one which Rossetti wrote in a poem on the same topic, which the students had also read. Unlike his later canvases of single women caught in moments of reverie, Found is Rossetti's only attempt to uphold the moral principles of the early Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; it is a moral tale of an encounter between a woman, turned prostitute, and her former lover, a drover, bringing one lone calf to market. Although collectively all three figures convey the meaning of this painting, the calf in particular functions on a symbolic level to emphasize the woman's victimization; another symbol, the trampled roses on the prostitute's gaudy dress, firmly links the woman to the drover's calf, netted and tethered in a cart. The students's descriptions of these two symbols, neither of which is mentioned in the poem, ultimately illustrate the typology we propose of how students make hollow, factual, and ideational connections, in this case between the sister arts.

The first student writes of the rose pattern:

> The woman is dressed in a long flowing dress which surrounds her body in a cumbersome pool of material. The pattern is that of chopped red rose buds printed on pure white silk or satin.

This student points to the rose pattern on the woman's dress and then calls attention to a significant detail: the roses are "chopped" from their stems. Rather than uncode the floral symbol and the meaning of this detail, she elects in her paper to move

on to discuss in a similar fashion the calf and other parts of the painting. She directs our attention to a salient detail which can ultimately reveal how the picture speaks to the viewer, but she fails to make any meaningful connection between the object and its underlying meaning. She creates a hollow connection because she fails to ask the detail the right question, and so her analysis of the image does not speak at a factual or an ideational level.

The second student focuses on the roses on the prostitute's dress, but moves further in connecting the image to the verbal message underlying them. He writes:

> The woman in the painting is the next figure which catches one's eye. She is dressed in gaudy clothing and is probably a prostitute since prostitution was becoming very common during the period the picture was made. If one looks closely at her dress, they will notice that it has a pattern of crushed roses. Roses are often used to symbolize love and the fact that they are crushed probably symbolizes that the woman's love has been trampled and used. This also tends to show the viewer that she is a prostitute as a prostitute's love would be misused.

Despite his qualification, this student calls upon the language of flowers to uncode the relationship between this image and its meaning. But he fails to connect the significance of the detail to the man holding the woman. The gaudiness of her dress reveals that she is now a prostitute, but the cut flowers also reveal that her love has been crushed--not just by men at large as he proposes--but by the drover who now holds her even though she has turned to prostitution because their love has died. Not hollow, his connection correctly uncodes part of the meaning of the canvas. But it remains a factual connection rather than an ideational one because the student sees this detail in isolation

rather than in relation to the surrounding images, such as the symbolic calf and the man, and the meanings underlying them.

The third student--whose visual literacy skills have clearly benefited from an Art History course--"reads" the rose in the context of its surrounding symbols. She writes:

> The roses on the female's dress are cut and trampled, no longer fresh. Roses have commonly been used as a symbol of love and in the composition the love between these two people has died, as have the flowers.

After first noting the rose detail and inferring from it a symbolic meaning, this student begins to move beyond the factual level by relating it to the meaning of the surrounding figure, the drover. She posits that the woman's state is related to her relationship with the drover on canvas, shown to be in conflict with the prostitute, rather than men at large, as the second student did. This student then proceeds in her analysis to make a connection between the woman wearing a dress of trampled roses and the calf netted and tethered in a cart. In fact, she reads the meaning underlying these two images in relation to each other and the drover as she writes:

> The animal, like the female, is trapped. At one time they both were free and innocent and now, due to particular circumstances, the calf and the woman's destinies are similarly illustrated. Rossetti shows the power of the man which leads to the inevitable fate of both the woman and the calf.

The images speak to the reader/viewer and to each other, showing how the student makes an ideational connection by exploring the meaning these three figures on canvas collectively convey.

In the subsequent papers on the relationship between images and words students readily made connections regarding

similarities and differences between the arts; these papers include: uncoding Cruikshank's visual details used to promote his anti-Temperance message in The Bottle; comparing and contrasting Cruikshank's illustrations and Dickens' narrative of Oliver Twist; and arguing in favor of Sir John Tenniel's or Lewis Carroll's illustrations of Carroll's Alice. The growth in the students' ability to uncode the meaning underlying an image was most evident six weeks into the course when all but one of the seventeen students were able first to make a factual connection by pointing and uncoding salient visual details in isolation, and also to go on to make an ideational connection by discussing these images as interrelated parts presenting a message in Cruikshank's Temperance plates. Of most interest, one student compared Cruikshank's anti-Temperance campaign in The Bottle to Reagan's current anti-drug campaign; in his essay, he explained that: "Cruikshank shows us that taking a drop of gin [in Victorian times] is just as serious as crack--fatal consequences happen if you encounter it once." This student is one among a few who have made an insightful connection by reaching across time to understand parallel issues in contemporary and Victorian times.

Well into the second month of the course students were able to see how an illustration highlights essential information in a text or provides missing information. This growth in their connection making within this LS III course was most evident when we examined Cruikshank's illustrations for Oliver Twist. To illustrate, one student wrote an essay on the artistic liberty Cruikshank takes in creating the plate "Oliver Amazed at the

Dodge's Mode of 'Going to Work'" (also on page 4). She writes:

> Dickens makes no mention of any witness to the crime [for which Oliver is falsely blamed], therefore suggesting to the audience that Oliver's fate is sealed and that he will be convicted as the pickpocket who robbed Mr. Brownlow. Cruikshank, on the other hand, sketches a shopkeeper hidden in the shadows in the bookstall. As he peers out into the alley, he sees the crime occur, and will therefore be able to defend Oliver in the courtroom. Although Dickens does not include the shopkeeper in this scene in the text, Cruikshank's illustrated insights demonstrate his use of artistic liberty to forewarn the reader/viewer of the serial. [In the following installment] the shopkeeper will stand as a witness to testify for the protection of Oliver's innocence.

She not only reads the image but uncodes it in relation to the surrounding chapters to support her thesis that Cruikshank's artistic liberty enhances Dickens' passage by assuring the reader that Oliver will be proven innocent despite what the text seems to indicate. From this ideational connection, she moves to a level of insight by connecting Oliver Twist to Meisel's concept of "illustration": that which adds to the text but remains faithful to it. She concludes:

> Cruikshank's creative additions of Mr. Brownlow's hat, Oliver's gestures of horror, and the shopkeeper, each credit Cruikshank's ability to heighten the awareness of the reader in what Meisel calls an "illustration" because it remains compatible with the storyline of the text.

Connecting Dickens' and Cruikshank's word and picture interplay to Meisel's critical terminology, she moves the relationship beyond this specific image and text to a larger critical context, which illuminates not only this related passage and illustration but the relationship between the arts at large.

The nature of Liberal Studies III courses seems to encourage the students to make a full range of connections. As my course nears its completion, students are still making factual connections

between the arts, but rarely hollow ones; increasingly, they are making ideational connections as they relate painting to its sister art, and occasionally, as this student did, reaching the level of insight.