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ABSTRACT

One of a series of six portraits of high school literature classrooms, this paper gives a detailed, evocative characterization of how one "master teacher" introduced, undertook, and guided the study of literature, focusing in particular on how the teacher interacted with students in the context of discussion of a literary work in class. The paper recounts how a teacher-researcher observed an instructional unit of literature by (1) conducting taped interviews with the teacher as well as with her students; (2) gathering lesson plans, study guidelines, and assignments related to the instructional units to be observed; and (3) making videotapes of the classes involved; and finally (4) writing a narrative account of what had been observed in the class and what its significance appeared to be. This account describes a class of 12 seniors at a private academy for girls reading Margaret Craven's "I Heard the Owl Call My Name," and led by their teacher to make personal connections with literature, to express and maintain their beliefs while allowing others their opinions--how in short, they are coming to view literature as one of life's amenities. (SR)

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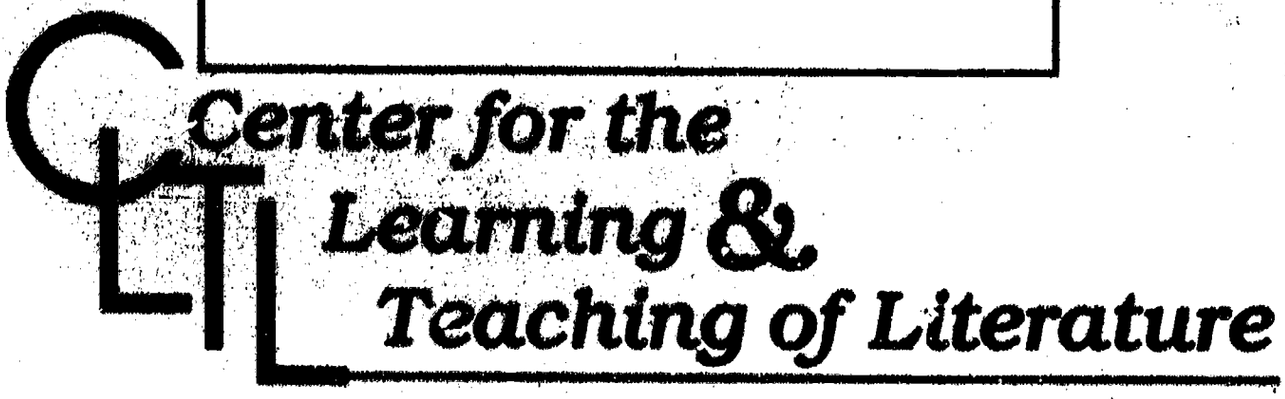

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Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature

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Center-sponsored research falls into three broad areas: 1) surveys of current practice in the teaching of literature, including studies of both what is taught and how it is taught; 2) studies of alternative approaches to instruction and their effects on students' knowledge of literature and critical-thinking abilities; and 3) studies of alternative approaches to the assessment of literature achievement, including both classroom-based and larger-scale approaches to testing.

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Preface

Overview

The following portrait of a high school literature classroom results from a year-long teacher-research project planned and implemented by a group of high school English teachers from districts in and around Albany, New York. This portrait is one of six produced during the first year of the project, each of which is available separately from the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature. The researchers are themselves all experienced professionals, regarded by colleagues, supervisors, and principals as outstanding literature instructors in their own right. Each of them undertook to observe an instructional unit of another English teacher considered to be equally accomplished in presenting literature to high school students. A unit was defined as the study of a novel, a play, or a sequence of short stories or poems over a period of four to five days. The intent was to compose detailed, evocative characterizations of what particular and well-regarded high school literature teachers actually do in their classrooms.

Each teacher-researcher chose a colleague whose experience and expertise were popularly thought to be exceptional. The researcher conducted taped interviews with the "master teacher," as well as with his or her students, gathered lesson plans, study guidelines, and assignments related to the instructional units to be observed, and made videotapes of the classes involved. Each researcher discussed and studied these materials with the teacher during the observation phase of the project and with the other researchers in the analysis phase. Throughout the study, the researchers also continually reviewed their evolving interpretations of materials with project coordinators. Finally, each wrote a narrative account of what she or he had seen and what its significance appeared to be, preparing the account through several drafts, until themes and details emerged that seemed to the members of the project team and to the master teacher to provide an authentic rendering of the classroom experience.

Goals and Methods

The question directing the research was this: How do the best high school English teachers introduce, undertake, and guide the study of literature in their classrooms? Plainly, there are nettlesome prior questions lurking here: What does "best" mean? What are the criteria for excellence? Who gets to say so? What does "literature" entail? But the concern of the project was to find out what teachers who are perceived to be successful actually do, the ways in which they do it, and the explanations they may offer for their practices. The attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that might underlie perceptions of excellence were not an immediate concern, although the portraits that finally emerged of good teachers in action certainly direct attention to what the normal criteria of successful literature instruction are thought to be at the present time. Nor was the theoretically vexed question of what constitutes literature an immediate issue, though the texts that various teachers chose for their classes represent statements about what literature is thought to include in the context of high school curricula today.

The master teachers of the study were selected simply by appeal to local knowledge. The researchers, all veteran educators in the Albany area, asked themselves and others which local

high school English teachers have the most established reputations in literature instruction according to colleagues, supervisors, and students. There was no a priori critique of these public perceptions; instead, taken at face value, they were regarded as reliable indicators of the current, commonsense understanding of what makes for quality of instruction. The literary text that formed the basis of class work in each instance was the choice of the teacher or program involved, reflecting, at least as far as the project was concerned, the normal, current sense of appropriate reading material for a particular grade level in Albany-area communities.

The research question was restricted to focus primarily on how a successful teacher interacts with students in the context of discussion of a literary work during class. Hence, less attention was directed to activities such as reading aloud or lecturing on background information, for instance, except insofar as they set up and conditioned opportunities for class discussion. Nor was much attention paid to those portions of class time devoted to routine business matters, "visiting" before and after class, or disciplinary and other regulatory actions, except, once again, to the extent that they might affect the character of discussion.

Naturally, the question "What constitutes 'discussion'?" and the related question "When is 'discussion' going on?" were persistent concerns, by no means easily dispatched. Initially, the researchers were prone to conceive discussion in their own favorite terms, which for one meant little or no teacher involvement, for another involvement but not direction, for still another, lecture or controlled questioning interspersed with student responses. Eventually, members of the research group agreed that discussion was properly whatever a particular master teacher said it was within his or her own classroom.

Researchers and teachers agreed in advance on the units of instruction that would be observed. During preclass interviews, each researcher asked about the reasons for choosing particular texts, what the teacher hoped to accomplish on each class day, what she or he expected of the students, and what assignments would support in-class work. The researcher also asked about the teacher's views of literature, literary study, and teaching. Following these interviews, arrangements were made to videotape classes in which discussion would be a primary activity and to observe but not to videotape other classes in which lecture, reading aloud, or other business would predominate (during these sessions researchers took notes only). Interestingly, no classes featured more time spent on lecture than on discussing the text: student involvement of one kind or another was a consistent feature of the six classrooms. After each class, another meeting enabled the researcher and teacher to review portions of videotape, go over written notes, and discuss perceptions (on both sides) of what happened and why. The research group believed it was important to richness of perception that the teachers have the fullest opportunity to react to the tapes, comment on their practices, explain them in any way that seemed valuable, and react to the impressions that the researcher had formed of class activities.

Since there was no intent to evaluate or critique instructional practices or to view them from some other stance of privileged objectivity, teachers felt free to be candid about what worked and what didn't. Since the researchers were high school teachers themselves, they were able to display the perceptual judgment tempered by generosity that frequently characterizes those who have "been there" and who understand the obligations but also the difficulties of

classroom work. The researchers knew the teachers as responsible professionals; the teachers trusted the researchers to tell their stories honestly.

The researchers and project coordinators spent considerable time exploring the epistemological and hermeneutic questions that surround practices of observing and writing about complex human settings. Everyone acknowledged the necessarily interpretive nature of classroom observation, the influence of a researcher's perspective, the impact of a camcorder's presence, location, focus, and movement on what is seen, the selectivity and slant of field notes, the necessary but simplifying reduction of experiential detail to judgments, characterizations, and conclusions--in general the interrelationship between observer and object observed as it is finally constituted in the textual record of some experience. The aim was to achieve what Clifford Geertz has called "thick description," a narrative rendering of classroom reality, its ambiguities all intact, not a model, statistical average, or other purified representation of "what happened." The teacher-researchers shared a pervasive self-consciousness about interpretation, a desire to offer richness of detail in place of clearcut generalities, a concern for discussing "readings" of the classroom with the largest possible number of people (the teacher and students involved as well as the other researchers and the coordinators of the project), a determination to write narratives about teachers' practices rather than conventional research reports, an emphasis on "storyteller," "theme," "plot," and "character," more typical of literary study than of empirical research. In this instance, researchers and teachers collaborated to create stories of classroom life: their viewpoints converge and diverge in intricate ways which the resulting narratives do not attempt to conceal. The researchers are narrators who do not seek to render themselves invisible in what they write, whose voices are distinctive and important to the meaningfulness of the stories. The teachers and students are characters who come to life according to the ways in which they have been conceived by the narrators. Each story is organized--has plot--according to the themes that emerged for each narrator over the course of observation and talk. Following is one teacher-researcher's narrative. The others are also available as Literature Center reports.

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"Maybe they don't have anywhere else to go. And since there are no males, no one to impress."

Brian, a lanky ninth grader from my public high school, is giving up his vacation to lug equipment, lay out microphones, and string wire so we can videotape four classes of Contemporary Fiction taught by Carol Johnson at The Chestnut Hill School, a private academy for girls in grades 9 through 12. I am counting on Brian to solve mechanical problems, but I gain more than a technical expert for Brian notices what I overlook and makes observations which affect what I notice. While I struggle to jot down names and descriptions of who is wearing what and how each moves, Brian wildly pans the camera: zooming in on a box of cereal next to a student's notebook; tracking the arrival of an ethereal blonde; pulling back to show the eager teenagers responding to their teacher's questions.

Brian finds these young women truly committed to learning from one another and seriously interested in sharing ideas. He struggles to account for the difference between his own school experience and the scene before him: eleven seniors and one junior animatedly sharing their opinions of I Heard the Owl Call My Name. In Brian's English class, "about five kids really care about discussing anything serious. The rest are speaking to impress a member of the opposite sex or are thinking about lunch."

The teacher, Carol Johnson, agrees with Brian that her students are actively connected "either focusing on me or on the speaker within the group."

How does this happen? These are predominantly second semester seniors, after all, and everyone knows how difficult they are to motivate. Echoing the feelings of 17-year-olds everywhere, Lynn writes, "I am so anxious to be out of here and on to the next stage of my life, I can taste it." Moreover, English is a second language for one of the students and written English feels like a foreign language to several others. Most are "just average students." Finally, this is the group's third session and teacher and students are still negotiating ground rules, authority, and trust. Yet, even this early in the semester, students interact as equals with no putdowns or sarcastic comments or off-the-wall ideas, and Brian longs to "jump into their conversation."

Clearly, gender and class are partially responsible for the commitment Brian recognizes, but they do not guarantee interest. The current student body at Chestnut Hill is 13 percent Asian, Hispanic, and Black, and students come from 17 foreign countries, in addition to the U.S. and Canada. Almost one third receive financial aid and 55 percent are from public

schools. Traditionally, the school has provided a supportive, nurturing community for its disparate elements and the teachers, students, and administration work tirelessly to maintain a family feeling. In the end, the closely knit community is responsible for much of the commitment we find in this class.

Lynn tells me the students care about discussing ideas with one another because they know each other well, "not like in (my) public school which is three times the size of Chestnut Hill, where you've never seen this person before in your life, you're with her for a semester, and you still don't know anything about her outside the classroom." In Lynn's former school, "There were cliques galore and for a small discussion group, if you put different cliques together, they would just sit there and ignore each other....Around here, yes, there are cliques...and there are groups of friends, but they mold together more. You're more likely to find people who are in two or three different groups."

Also, Lynn is accustomed to sitting down with other girls in her dorm and talking over ideas without a "real" teacher present and she feels confident she and her friends can interpret a text on their own. "It may not be what is the accepted interpretation and it would take longer to get ideas out because there's no teacher to elicit them, but it could be done," she remarks.

The practice of peer dialogue outside the classroom is reflected in the discussion behavior inside Carol Johnson's class. These teenagers usually speak one at a time, yet rarely raise their hands to be called on. Often someone will say, "I agree with Barbara," or "I don't agree with Barbara but I do agree with Ellen," demonstrating, as Brian has suggested, that they really are involved and paying attention. But Carol claims no special instructions, only the subtle modeling of discussion skills. However, her self-effacing description does not do justice to her actual role in the class.

If Carol were a student in her own class, she would feel a responsibility to participate regularly in discussions and that's what she tells her students she expects from them. She stresses that unless a person speaks, her ideas cannot charge someone else or get another student to think about something in a different way. I notice that Marianne feels the burden of that responsibility when she takes Carol aside before a session and says, "I'm sorry I let you down yesterday in discussion but I wasn't feeling well."

Yet Carol is sensitive to those young women who have difficulty voicing their ideas in discussion. "Unless you can jump in with them, it's pretty tough because they are very verbal, eager, and excited. It's not that they are showing off; it's just that they're very involved."

Carol remembers herself in high school, knowing what she wanted to say but needing time to frame the words, and when someone else stated her ideas feeling, "Oh, I haven't been fast enough; the teacher won't recognize that I knew the answer, too." To help the quiet or shy, sometimes she will change the dynamics of a discussion by interrupting and giving each girl an opportunity to comment on what she has heard so far. Another time she might ask the students to wait before answering a question so everyone has a chance to think before anyone responds. All the while, she tries not to squelch the eagerness and interest of the talkers.

Ellen, a newcomer to the school, uses the term mediator to describe Carol's role in discussion. Ellen sees her teacher as essential for insecure girls trying to jump into the conversation and she wishes the class were smaller, five or six students at most, so everyone's

ideas could always be heard.

Lynn, who has an added year at Chestnut Hill and feels more at home here, does not want Carol to help her join the conversation. She wants an authority figure to say, in response to a student's opinion, "Okay, that's well and good, but you're not making points. What do you mean by this?"

Carol believes, "education is all about building confidence. It is discovery and being excited about ideas." Carol orchestrates a discussion so that young women in her class have the opportunity to explore and express their ideas and feelings.

"The more you define yourself and how you see yourself connected to the world, the stronger and more confident you become," Carol says. Most of the young women in her class do speak with confidence. In this all female discussion group, no one plays the role of clown or distractor, which I have seen in my co-ed classes. There is not an intellectual showing off, either. The group seems to divide into the talkers and the quiet ones, but those roles are not fixed and later in the semester I notice that some of the quiet ones have days when they fit the talker category and the talkers are very quiet. Moreover, an observer cannot tell which students are buddies, although Carol feels that many of the girls in this room are good friends.

Supporting the group figures into a definition of what constitutes a successful discussion. Carol and her students use almost identical language to define success. "If I leave feeling good about it, which means if I felt like I've really thought of something new or have seen something new in the text that I think is important, then I'm happy. I walk away feeling good," Ellen comments.

Returning from our first taping, Brian recalls the days when school was genderless and what a difference it made in his classroom talk when he discovered girls. Previously, neither of us had felt any strong bias toward single sex education, but now we both agree, the investment seems higher in Carol's all female class.

Working together, Carol and the Chestnut Hill community create a supportive environment which validates and affirms female students. Chestnut Hill did not make Carol a supportive, nurturing teacher. Her values were deeply ingrained before her arrival at the school 15 years ago. But the institution has encouraged and reinforced those values rather than opposing or contradicting them. For example, Chestnut Hill not only provides multiple opportunities for civilized conversation, but it also provides a civilized schedule for students and teachers.

As Brian commented, students do not always have somewhere they are supposed to be. The Chestnut Hill schedule leaves room for a leisurely lunch hour and enough time between classes so that no one need slam her notebook shut five minutes before the end of one class, in order to be ready to rush off to the next one. There is no clock in this classroom area and Carol does not wear a watch. Although she assures me that bells signal class, they are so soft that I never hear them once. The decelerated pace allows time for each student to finish her sentence or to reflect on someone else's ideas. Furthermore, Carol does not teach one class after another, so there is time for her to meet with students before Contemporary Fiction begins.

Carol values the leisurely moments before the full group meeting because these moments

reinforce her developing relationship with her students which plays an important part in the climate of classroom discussions. Clutching coffee cups, the students in denim or leather, Kenya bags or day packs casually slung over their shoulders, arrive early, leaving time to get more coffee from the kitchen down the hall or to talk with Carol.

"I thought about you reading this weekend, at the end, especially. I sat there and cried," she confides to Beth who has recently experienced a death in her family. And when Beth confesses she is "lost" in some parts of Owl, Carol uses these moments to iron out Beth's questions and to schedule a more formal conference for the next day.

"Hi, how were your SAT's?" she asks the lone junior.

"Have you seen the movie Ironweed yet?" she queries an eager senior who is anxious to begin reading it and does not like Owl. "It's okay not to like this book. Is it the entire book or just the ending you don't like?"

Carol checks how long the reading is taking each student. She is concerned she may be assigning too much, so the slower readers will not be able to keep pace.

Her concern about giving enough time seems to pay off because the students are doing the reading. They are quick to cite the page number when Carol searches for an apt reference and their copies of Owl look well thumbed.

On the day of my first observation Carol even makes time for each student to introduce herself to me and to have me explain the research project. She consistently models good manners, and since she goes into class demonstrating an eagerness to discuss, an openness to new ideas, and a delight in being with these young women, an observer finds her students effortlessly mirroring her attitude in discussion.

Because the school community supports her, Carol can make the giving of time a priority. Her professional reading also validates this priority. Writing Down the Bones by Natalie Goldberg emphasizes free writing and pre-writing and, more significantly, the giving of time. "I really think," Carol says, "that I try to bring across the point to my students that (writing) takes time. You need to write and then come back and reflect. We say it is important, but we aren't willing to give them time. I've tried very hard to stick my feet to the ground and hold myself back." This notion is also reflected in her unhurried, easy-going pace. She never rushes. She never appears breathless, angry, or out of sorts. And so, even though she is quite nervous as Brian wires her for the videotaping, she relaxes as her students gather in Scribner Suite. "I feel better now that you're here," she tells them.

It is not surprising that Carol, who thinks a discussion is like a good meal, would choose as a meeting place an area with two dining tables and comfortable, upholstered dining chairs. The students push the tables side by side to create a sense of unity. Later Caitlin admits to me, "I hated it when you pulled the tables apart for the video camera. It made me feel we were less of a group." Indeed, the first time I rearranged the furniture, Karen and Kristan join raised hands across the arm's length chasm that separates them. Later, Carol wishes she had sat down to close the void. "Actual physical connectedness is important to me," she comments. Carol believes conversation is easier when students are sharing around a table and maintains she would switch the chairs into a circle if their class had to meet in a traditional classroom. Since

Chestnut Hill allows teachers to choose their own classroom space, Carol selects Scribner Suite for all her courses. Carol believes students need space when writing and reflecting, and she encourages them to use a smaller room across the hall if they need to get away even further.

Brian likes this inviting parlor where students move easily from the heavy oak tables to the plump couches facing one another in front of the fireplace. He feels he could go to school for four years in this room and never tire of it. Commenting favorably on the absence of fluorescent lights, he literally takes me by the arm to point out the variety of color, texture, and shape in this room: rich mahogany mantle; filtered sunshine through leaded glass window panes; navy blue oriental rug patterned with soft salmon roses. He scrutinizes the lithographs of the House of Lords on one wall and reads the titles of the leather bound books filling the bookcases. One of the reasons the class discussions differ from those to which he is accustomed, he suggests, is the room's invitation to look inward and reflect. An attractive classroom doesn't make all the difference of course, but this room certainly is an inviting spot in which to discuss literature.

Add to the beauty of Scribner Suite the almost church-like quiet about the area. Absent are the slamming lockers or the surging, shouting crowds of raucous teenagers who pass through the halls outside closed classroom doors of some high schools. Occasionally, while class is in session at Scribner Suite, unobtrusive visitors will pass by. On Ring Day, two noisy juniors, one blindfolded, disturb the discussion, causing Lynn to rise out of her seat, but they are gone before she reaches them. The detail of a student trying to quiet the noisemakers fascinates me. In my school, this is the teacher's role and noisy students are often greeted by other classmates as a delightful intrusion on par with fire drills.

For me, Scribner Suite's good taste, peaceful aura, and openness are mirrored in Carol Johnson, the teacher I have chosen to observe. Her willingness to try something new is evident when I ask if I may visit her class with technician and television camera and take up her planning time with interviews. "I'd love it," is her unhesitating reply.

To accommodate my video camera, Carol has changed the order of assignments for Contemporary Fiction, which is a one semester Humanities-English elective open to upper level students who could also elect from courses such as Major Works of British or American Literature, Dante's Divine Comedy, or Poetry as an Art Form. In previous semesters, Carol has shown the film Witness during the third meeting of class because she finds it an interesting way for her students to examine character, conflict, and imagery. So that I may observe class discussions, she has assigned I Heard the Owl Call My Name by Margaret Craven, a text she usually teaches in the middle of the semester.

I Heard the Owl Call My Name is a short, deceptively simple novel. In one sense, it is a hero's quest in which a young vicar, Mark Brian, is sent out by his bishop to Kingcome, "the hardest parish in British Columbia," a parish of Kwakiutl Indians. There, with the help of his Indian mentors, Jim and Marta, he learns not to fear death but to see it as "a triumph," and thus, unknowingly, he prepares for his own death. However, a Kwakiutl might read the novel as the economic and social destruction of the tribe by the white power structure.

From overhearing student comments, I learn that some of the Chestnut Hill readers are confused by the story and others don't like it. I sense a conflict brewing between them and Carol. Stories, especially this story, are important to her. In fact, she teaches a class in

storytelling and uses storytelling techniques to enrich her other courses. She believes, "Literature mirrors life and as we listen to stories being told by someone, we immediately compare ourselves to that individual and what we might have done differently." She passionately desires that her students not resist the story, but connect to it.

Because Carol fears her students' lives are so distanced from the Kwakiutl, she sees her initial task as that of sensitizing them to the Kwakiutl culture. The Kwakiutl define themselves by looking at the world around them, by sharing in all activities of nature; therefore, she has made 25-30 slides from a text on Indian culture to help them imagine the setting, the characters, the tribal rituals, and the dominant imagery. She has also combed through the novel to find appropriate passages to accompany the slides and has tried to match words and visuals. She wants her students to see "there is a place like the one being described...the people are real." She also stresses the notion of the Indian in the village and the idea that you "can't separate the Indian from the village or from the elements of nature."

Furthermore, Carol emphasizes the importance of imagery. She is especially interested in recurring imagery which symbolically represents characters' experiences or developing relationships. "I have to pick up particular images that are woven often by a writer throughout a work to help us see and sense characters and relationships and conflicts in a concrete and very rich way."

In an effort to invite these young women to appreciate the Indian perspective and to explore imagery, her first writing assignment asks them to define themselves as an element of nature in what ever way is comfortable for them.

In previous years, Carol might have handed out essay topics and skipped a personal response, but as it is the beginning of the semester, she feels an assignment in which the student connects herself to nature will help her open herself to an alien culture and also connect to the text.

Carol believes strongly that creative writing should support the teaching of literature. Her students will be producing the literature of the future, "so why shouldn't they be experimenting and having someone look at their work closely? I want them to play and experiment with language just like the author does," Carol says.

Even more important, Carol desires her students to see I Heard the Owl Call My Name as a work from the heart and from the mind. Consequently, she wants their writing, whether personal response or final essay, to come from the heart: to be closely connected to a personal viewpoint or experience. She will measure success, as well as frustration and resistance, by the insights her students gain into their own feelings and attitudes through their reading and writing.

Carol's handling of this first writing assignment subtly illustrates the feminist values implicit in her pedagogy. Carol, by the way, resists the label of feminist and says that if anything, she is a humanist. Nonetheless, her responses to her students seem especially sensitive and nurturing. For example, she recognizes that when a class is in the formative stage, getting students to share their personal reflections and ideas can be a struggle. She counts on previously established relationships with six of her twelve students to ease the tension of sharing personal responses. Her back-up strategy, should no one be willing to read her first writing

assignment to the group, is to read student work anonymously. Carol says of herself, "I tend to be a teacher who doesn't like to create a situation where there is tension, where there is conflict. I don't think that really encourages and fosters learning, but there are times when I'm aware that students, unless they are put on the spot, are not going to come into discussion, they're not going to take a risk, so I call on them or I challenge one to respond to someone else's comment...but those are methods I feel uncomfortable with." So rather than asking students to share their homework at the beginning of class, Carol opens with a less threatening question, "Why do you think I asked you to do last night's assignment?"

Immediately, Barbara zeros in on a connection. "Indians think about the afterlife and they believe in that so it doesn't seem as scary to them, so nature plays a bigger part, almost double (to) what it plays in our lives. I don't think white people always want to believe that death is a natural thing and try somehow to avoid it."

Carol comments that Barbara has focused on one of the main themes in the text and is surprised by how quickly and easily Barbara has made this connection. Then Carol re-emphasizes the idea that this homework exercise may help students become closer to Mark, the main character who is outside the Indian culture yet needs to become one with them if he is to serve successfully as their vicar. "Does Mark become one with the Indians?" she asks. Beth, Carolyn, Karen, Jill, and Lynn suggest answers and cite details from the text to support their opinions--a behavior dear to all English teacher's hearts--Carol's included. "Good details," she comments.

However, the students do not really agree on an answer and Carol does not push them to come to consensus. Ellen tells me that Carol is more interested in her students' ideas or in having them figure things out for themselves than she is in asking questions for which she already has the answer.

Some of these students have been reading carefully and some appear to have finished the entire book in two days. We tend to forget that when students enjoy a book, they inhale it in one sitting and don't limit themselves to the teacher's nightly assignment. Perhaps I am wrong; perhaps there is not a conflict brewing, after all.

Because she is expecting resistance to the sharing of homework, Carol waits only a few seconds after asking, "Now is anyone ready to read her piece aloud?" Then she offers to read their work anonymously. Immediately, the tension mounts.

"Do we have to give it to you?"

"I'm not done yet. Can I hand it in by three?"

In the pressure of the moment, she handles their reactions as a misunderstanding. "Some of you did not realize I expected drafts at the beginning of class, but I have enough to share anyway." Secretly she is disappointed that more girls are not prepared; she thinks that while some chose not to take the time to explore ideas, others might be hesitant about revealing personal information because it is their first writing assignment after having been together for just a couple of days.

Thank goodness for students like Karen. While not willing to read her piece herself, she

is willing to acknowledge authorship and is prepared to turn in a draft. The class enjoys Carol's reading of Karen's comparison of herself to a cat. In an effort to draw out Karen's latent knowledge of herself, Carol pushes her for more details. "I know you pretty well....What do you mean here when you say you're untrusting of people?" Carol probes and Karen elaborates further.

The authors of Women's Ways of Knowing (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986) identify Carol's behavior here as midwife teaching. "While the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner's head, the midwives draw it out. They assist students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it" (p. 217).

Carol wants her students "to really explore and explain what they mean and define more precisely." She suggests another feline characteristic which Karen might consider in her revision and then deliberately leafs through the papers for the next comparison by an anonymous student. Reviewing the videotape later, I realize Carol selected the next two pieces on lava and rain because the authors had not yet spoken in class that day.

"I am flowing lava. Malleable and amorphous, I take the shape of the object I finally cool upon. For hundreds of years I am silent and frozen. However, the earth is constantly moving and she rumbles her guttural roar and the sea floor shakes with laughter. The earth vomits a fresh spurt of scorching lava onto the surface and I am boiling hot again, broken from my immovable state."

Carol asks, "What about that individual? It's a wonderful image, isn't it? It's very figurative, very metaphorical, and that's what we'll be dealing with in this work."

I wish she would say more about this piece, even read it aloud again, but Carol has trouble responding further because the author is not willing to "claim those words as (her) own" and Carol does not want to put her on the spot this early in the semester. Not comfortable with tension, Carol consciously avoids classroom strategies which produce it. She does take time, however, to ask another student to paraphrase the passage and characterize the author. Barbara says the writer is calm and cool on the outside but once in a while "she just loses it and has to let out whatever is inside."

Carol models how to expand on a response by adding to Barbara's paraphrase, "or when this individual does feel something, she feels it passionately and isn't afraid to express it and let it all loose." The students do not make any further comments, so Carol moves on to a comparison between another anonymous writer and the rain. When Carol reads about rain, there are smiles, murmurs, and a suddenly impassioned interruption from Karen who has learned something from her previous dialogue with Carol. This time, without any teacher midwifery, Karen "explores and explains more precisely" her associations with rain and her agreements and disagreements with the writer.

Then, hands folded as if in prayer, Carol redirects the discussion from the students' imagery to a discussion of the text, specifically the image of the salmon, which she feels reflects the vicar's life and the main theme, "which is so difficult to define and describe." Having encouraged her students to connect like the Kwakiutl with nature, Carol now asks them to identify with a specific nature image, the salmon, in order to better understand the vicar's feelings. The vicar defines himself as one of the salmon people and the Indians agree with his

assessment. As she reads relevant passages in the text showing the vicar's connection to the salmon, the students follow closely, underlining in the paperback copies which they have purchased. Karen, who seems comfortable stating her ideas without being called upon by the teacher, comments on the water-like quality of the passage Carol has read. Her remark reminds me that Carol's voice, like Margaret Craven's prose, has a rhythm or a music which suggests the lapping of water against the shore. It is a lovely voice, yet Carol worries it may lull her students to sleep, so she consciously introduces energy and emphasis as she reads the culmination of today's lesson: a creative five part story of the salmon's existence. She asks the students to listen carefully as she reads through the five stages and to identify with the stage to which they feel closest and then to write about the significance of this stage for them. By giving this assignment, Carol reinforces her underlying goals for her students: to connect with nature, which is so important to the Indian; to identify the changes the vicar experiences; to reflect on their own lives; to connect their lives to salmon imagery, the most important image in the text for her.

"It is a different kind of exercise, but it seems so appropriate because the metaphor is so powerful...it represents the character of this work," according to Carol. While she reads aloud, one girl covers her eyes and another reflects, chin in hand. Parents and students walk by, a snowblower whirs in the distance, but the students concentrate on the salmon story. Class ends before the girls have time for much writing, so Carol suggests they complete their responses for homework.

Next, Carol puts the philosophy of Writing Down the Bones into action as she returns to the unfinished homework and gives the students more time to work on it.

"You know, it makes sense to me that you take these homework papers back. You have this description of where you feel that you are at this point in your lives and you have a clear definition of the individual you see as defined by the element of nature, so maybe one can help you to detail and describe more within the other. Why don't you take them back and if you want to revise or add, feel free but be ready to hand in both tomorrow."

Brian is fascinated by this approach. If his homework had been unfinished, his teacher would have said, "Young man you have detention." He likes the way Carol asserts her authority in a "seemingly unstructured way," and on this happy note, our observation ends.

Let's stop here for a moment and think about the salmon imagery which Carol focuses on for two classes. Why is the salmon so important? You may recall her earlier remark, "as we listen to stories being told by someone, we immediately compare ourselves to that individual." I agree. So when I read Owl, I cry--not at the end like Carol-- but at the point where the Indian matrons ask Mrs. Hudson what vegetable she will prepare for the white men attending the vicar's funeral. In tears, Mrs. Hudson replies, "Carrots....He (Mark) never liked mashed turnips and I made him eat them. I am a stubborn woman who wants her own way." Well, I, too, am a stubborn woman and this passage contains the important truth for me, reminding me that I may need to rethink a particularly rigid stance I have chosen to take toward a loved one. Because the lens I am using is focused on refusal to change and its consequences, I privilege the image of mashed turnips, rather than salmon, in my reading and would have a difficult time writing anything "from the heart" to connect my life to salmon. However, Carol is in another place. Her father died about the same time her four year old son was born, so the cycle of life and death may hold particular meaning for her, and the connections she makes between the salmon

cycle and the triumph of Mark's death may be personally comforting. Her particular, personal reading of this story is one with which her student Beth can easily identify because she, too, has experienced a death in her family.

Carol does question the objectivity of her reading, asking herself how she can be so sure that her interpretation is what the author intended. She relies on her own careful rereading to make "truthful" and "honest" connections and relationships in the text. However, Carol correctly recognizes how personal our association with a text can be. We may very much want to read it "as the author intended" but objectivity is almost impossible. What we teachers need to recognize is our privileging of a particular interpretation, and having recognized that, to be aware how we privilege the student responses which most closely approximate our own reading of the text. Most difficult of all, we may also need to recognize that not every reader will make a personal connection or identification with the text we have chosen to teach. No matter how we try to help make those connections, some readers will not connect the text to an issue that is important to their lives. Or, if they do, they may not be willing to tell us about it. I wonder whether a teacher's mediating between the text and the student interferes with the student's personal reading of the story. By focusing on nature imagery, especially salmon, has Carol closed off other student responses? She has invested time and energy in her approach to the novel but is bound to be disappointed if student readers do not take seriously what she considers important.

Both Lynn and Ellen have figured out what is important to Carol and when they read, they tend to focus on what they think will interest her. "I've had her before; I know how her mind works," Lynn claims.

Yet reading for the teacher may lead to writing what they think she wants, or retelling her what she has told them, rather than exploring ideas in the story which connect to their own lives. Carol wants her students to create meaning for themselves, and yet her privileging of salmon imagery may send them a different message.

This issue of teacher authority over the text surfaces again the day after the students have completed their second personal writing assignment in which they connect their own stage of development with the appropriate salmon stage. Carol moves them back to a discussion of the novel itself with the direction, "Try to recall the stages that the vicar goes through in the novel and how you would characterize his life given these stages." She wants them to reveal what they have remembered from their reading and is also checking to see if they have made any connection between the novel and the salmon response exercise. After the students have had time to review their impressions and to write down their thoughts, Carol calls upon Ellen to state what connections she has made with Mark's earlier life and the first stage description of the salmon. Ellen surprises Carol by going outside the story to "his childhood before we knew him." Carol thinks, "The relationship she is forming isn't all that inaccurate," but she is expecting students to stay within the boundaries of the text.

Perhaps Ellen goes outside the text because she feels a stronger sense of authority there. In an interview she says that Carol is "an expert because she's read the book several times and she knows what parts she thinks are important."

After Carol acknowledges that she "hadn't thought about moving outside the work in that way," Barbara offers a different idea. Karen, without being called on, sides with Ellen's

perspective and Beth chimes in, agreeing with Barbara. A nice conversation is building here, but Carol interrupts by calling on Jennifer to connect stage two with Mark's life. Carol has to make a choice: whether to break in and make room for Jennifer, a very quiet student who is new to Carol's class, or whether to let four students, who are comfortably talking, continue. Ellen, who feels uncomfortable entering into discussion, counts on Chris to help and feels strongly that the class needs Carol to keep "just one certain person or group in the discussion (from) talking the whole time."

After validating Jennifer's response, Carol invites other student reactions and Lynn comments, "I looked at it differently." Before long almost everyone in the room has contributed her connection between Mark's life and one of the five salmon stages. Now the discussion moves from the connection between the salmon story and the cycle of life and death to Mark's death being "a triumph." At this point, Carol asks them to look at a passage that she has chosen and tell her how they reacted to it. The passage describes Mark's death and Carol thinks it connects to the points the students have been making. Marianne softly suggests that the description builds to a crescendo, "something that I guess you could call a climax," and suddenly th proverbial light bulb blinks over Carolyn's head.

"Are you supposed to know at that point (he) got hit?"

Lynn admits, "I didn't quite, I never understood what it was (the author) was saying."

Carolyn and Lynn thrash out, publicly, what they had misunderstood and then Carol asks them, "Now that you know Mark is dead, does it seem an appropriate ending?" Students seem at ease with Carolyn and Lynn's admitting what they had not understood, so along with debating Carol's question about Mark's death, they also raise some other questions that they have had about this novel. It is a tribute to the institution's philosophy and to Carol's feminist pedagogy that these young women feel safe enough to freely admit what they do not understand and to help each other figure out what is happening in the story. This incident illustrates the validity of Ellen's comment, "We're not just learning from the teacher...but we're learning from each other."

During this exchange, Carol reinforces the idea that no one writes the same way and no one reads the same way. She believes, "When I tell a class that I've never thought of something a certain way and that their interpretation seems accurate, as long as I really believe that...I think it takes the fear away from the learning. They can say, 'Well, gee, if she questions it, I can question it, too, and I don't have to perceive everything as everyone else does in this class.' There may be some room for new meanings or understandings. I think the longer I've been teaching, the less afraid I am to say that I don't know, or that I will find out, or let's take a look at this together and come up with an answer."

Carol is willing to make herself vulnerable, to admit she does not have all the answers, and both Ellen and Lynn are aware of this. Neither student feels her teacher is the sole authority for interpretation, and Ellen adds, "Everyone has her own view of reality and everyone has her own view of anything she tries to interpret." And yet they also turn to Carol as the authority who knows the book better than they and so they try to read it as she would. As the authority, Carol has designed the Owl unit around her own interpretation of the text. That is the track she keeps them on.

Lynn and Ellen use almost identical terminology when describing their teacher: "She keeps us on track." Yet, the students can "get there in ways she never imagined" or set their own agenda, so there is no sense they feel controlled by her. In fact, they suggest there is a nice balance between her agenda and theirs. I think of a see-saw: sometimes Carol dominates by trying to impose her reading on the class; sometimes the students dominate in the discussions where they learn from each other.

Another example of learning from each other occurs the day Karen pronounces, "These people live in a completely different society and it's different than the one we live in so it's hard to imagine. There's not much death and murder and drugs."

At this point I very much want to interrupt and ask Karen what book she has been reading. There must be at least one death in each chapter of this novel and alcoholism is rampant.

One of the reasons I admire Carol so much is her low-key response. Her reply to Karen's reading of "not much death" is a mildly puzzled, "There isn't?" which leaves room for Beth to gently point out that the Indian response to death is "so everyday, so nonchalant almost" compared to ours that Karen might not have noticed how often it occurs in the book.

Now I appreciate the truth of Ellen's comment, "In Contemporary Fiction a discussion is an exchange of interpretations, not necessarily with a right or wrong answer." Another student mentions that she does not feel judged in Carol's class and I envy Carol her ability to affirm rather than judge. On this day Carol moves aside to let one student teach another, just as she allowed Ellen a few days earlier to point out to Lynn and Karen why a certain passage suggests an optimistic ending rather than a pessimistic one. Ellen's view happens to be the one that Carol agrees with, but she does not reinforce Ellen by saying, "Good" or "Right." Nor does she give any facial clues today to suggest that Beth has given "the right answer."

Ellen finds the student-centered discussion in Contemporary Fiction gives her "many more ideas of how to interpret texts....I have my own perception and when I get to hear everyone else's, it just makes the story so much brighter."

Lynn adds, "Like you'll be discussing something and someone will say, 'Yeah, but what if?' and you'll go, 'I never thought of that' and it just brings another aspect." When the talk shifts from the text to ideas outside it, the students assert their authority and question one another in a sharper, more involved way. One day Lynn takes a risk and presents her non-traditional ideas of God. She is aware that Carol is deeply religious, but Lynn feels sure that Carol would not get angry at anything Lynn might say because "she's so open about everything."

Conscious that when Lynn expresses her view about God there is no feeling of, "I'll give you back what I've read and what I think you want to hear," Carol also recognizes that Lynn speaks with a strong sense of authority. Later on, Lynn presents an unusual idea about parallel universes which the group acknowledges seriously and questions sharply but politely. I wonder what would have happened if Lynn had broached this idea in her former high school? "You don't have to worry about looking stupid" at Chestnut Hill, Lynn replies, but public school is another matter. She concedes she might not have taken such a risk there.

Risk-taking is something with which Carol feels comfortable. Not many teachers would

be sufficiently confident to invite an outside teacher to observe their classes, especially at the beginning of the semester. Later, as Carol and I review the four videotapes, she thinks about changes she will make if she teaches Owl next semester. Beginning the course with "a culture that is so foreign to them" is a problem, but she also feels "there isn't the detail in the passages...that they can look at for answers and the meanings are somewhat hidden....Even though we know a fair amount...(we) still have a feeling that (we)...don't have a clear sense of these Indians and the kind of life they lead and the beliefs that are so much a part of them."

Carol probably will not present Owl as the first text again and notes that Ironweed, the book read after Owl, has been more accessible. Students find significant passages more easily and imagine what might happen to the characters in the future. They relate more easily to the female character, Helen, than they did to Mark, and they are more comfortable with the urban setting of the novel.

Carol finds, "the involvement level from all members is better now," and she believes the students are discussing even more freely and confidently. That may be true, but I can't believe Ironweed is more accessible. Perhaps their practice with Owl has made searching for imagery in Ironweed easier. Also, the students are no longer under the eye of the video camera and a researcher.

While the taped discussions of Owl showed Carol that her students were aware of and sensitive to the images in the text and were able to identify major and minor imagery, their final essays were disappointing to her. Since I have received more than my share of "disappointing" essays over the past 15 years, the mystery about what exactly derailed these students when they sat down to write interests me.

Reflecting on the unit, I believe the problem began when two opposing ideas collided: objectively reading the text as the author intended versus connecting the text to a personal point or experience. Carol justifies her interpretation of the text by finding recurring imagery which seems to make her reading more "truthful" and "honest." However, her interpretation is really based on a very personal response to her own experience with death and she has found clues in the text to support that reading. Beth, the student who had recently experienced death in her family, "could feel what she was reading about and understand better because of a personal perspective," according to Carol. But what of those students who did not share this personal perspective or who did not wish to think about it, if they had? Was enough room left for them to inhabit their own reading? Or did they settle for reading through their teacher's eyes rather than their own?

Although the students write two personal responses, their final paper, which is graded, concerns imagery. That topic does not leave much room for Barbara, who has been wrestling with her sense of alienation from the Kwakiutl world. She feels much is "unreal" in this book and it is the tension between reality and unreality which she would like to explore. However, she can't make her ideas fit the model for writing about texts from the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking which Carol suggests her students use. In this model the student is asked "to list images she remembers from the text, circle three which are most significant, describe each, and state how each affects her. Then the student is to state what the three images have in common and what theme or themes run through what she has written. She is to imagine what assertion the text is making based on these three images and finally, explain what she likes and dislikes about the text and why."

By encouraging the student to pick images which are important to her personally, Carol is hoping to find the essays "come from the heart" and do not merely mimic ideas the writer may have heard in the class discussions. Yet when a student suggests mashed turnips is an image that is important to her ("Aha," I think to myself, "someone else is interested in refusal to change"), Carol comments, "I hadn't thought about turnips. It seems to be such a little minor detail, but it's interesting. We can use it."

By defining some images as "minor" and elevating others as "important," Carol is suggesting she knows the ideal way to read Owl. That makes writing from the heart doubly difficult if a student's interest does not match the teacher's.

During the class in which Carol explains the Bard model, the students spontaneously begin comparing Owl with other books. Beth opens with, "You know, this book reminds me of A Light in the Forest" and Kristan and Ellen jump in with The Pearl and The Mosquito Coast. Later on in the semester, Carol encourages just such a comparison for an essay, but on this day she does not encourage the discussion to continue. Her agenda is to explain the Bard model, which she hopes will provide a "fail-safe structure." Here's another collision: how can one reconcile personal reading and writing from the heart with a formula which works against just that? On the last day of the unit, Karen volunteers, "I thought I was just answering the questions before I went on to the writing. I didn't realize I was writing my paper when I was going through the model."

But when Carol asks her, "At the end of the paper, do you imagine yourself talking about how the theme connects with you?" Karen is startled.

"The theme connects with me?" she echoes, puzzled. After all Carol's effort, here's a student who has not connected to the text through an issue in her own life. But there is something else at work, also. When I ask Lynn if she replays the class discussions in her head when she sits down to write an essay and then tries to argue back to her classmates on paper, she looks blankly at me for a minute and then murmurs, "I think I'm just writing to get the paper done....I've got too much work to do around here." If others feel this way--and what student hasn't--is it any wonder they welcome a formula to halfheartedly get the job done?

This episode makes me very conscious of the way I, too, search for a fail-safe method of writing, without thinking through the implications of that method. "This looks like a good model for us to follow," I'll think as I leaf through a resource book. I'll rip it out, present it to my class, and then wonder later why their papers are so boring. I blame them. I've never asked myself whether giving them a formula to follow gets in the way of their constructing knowledge for themselves.

Next semester, Carol plans to offer student papers to use as models for the essay assignment and will spend more time in class discussion differentiating between important and less important images. For example, mashed turnips is not an important image for Carol and she really doesn't want students to compare and contrast it with an "important" image (i.e., salmon).

She does give the students an opportunity to conference and revise after she reads the original Owl essays, and many do. Most are able to refer to appropriate passages from the text

to explain or defend their ideas, but only Beth writes from the heart. And thus Carol is faced with accepting "that even though one works very hard...some students are just not ready...to commit at this point, no matter how hard you struggle."

If success is using the ideas from a discussion but taking them further, thinking about issues raised in the literature, and defining ourselves by what we have explored, then the Owl unit is most successful for Beth and later on in the semester for a student who confronts the issue of personal growth versus the needs of the community.

This young woman, after four years at Chestnut Hill, will be returning to a culture where women have little power or authority. In an essay comparing Owl with two other books read in class, she focuses on the conflict between the young Indians' need for personal growth and the older Indians' need to have the community survive, and she raises the poignant question, "How far must one distance oneself from one's society or community in order to gain a sense of self that is not pressured to conform?" In connecting the text to an issue in her own life, this student is validating her teacher's feeling that literature offers us a chance to think about important issues and to define ourselves by what we've explored in a text. Her response also connects to a comment Carol makes, "The more...I'm teaching, the more I realize that everything is interconnected and related...so it will all turn out in the end....This realization has been pretty dramatic for me....It's affected the way I teach writing and the way I teach reading and the way I ask questions."

In the four days I observe the Owl unit, I witness other successes. I hear metaphorical pieces in which a student writer explores her similarity to a natural element such as a volcano or rain. I hear others cite passages from the text to support interpretations. Although the teacher has a personal reading which she reinforces throughout the unit, other voices confidently explain alternate approaches. When the students speak freely about their ideas of life after death, it seems to me they are speaking from the heart. What I never hear is a sarcastic put-down, and although I watch carefully for those subtle signals which comment on the value of a speaker's ideas, I see no rolling eyes or pursed lips. Speakers make eye contact with one another, although most often with the teacher, and remember the point a previous speaker has made. And Carol agrees, as we study the tapes, that the students seem attentive and involved.

Studying the tapes of herself teaching was a positive experience for Carol, one she wished she had time for more often. She was surprised the students "listen to me so attentively because I don't feel I have all that powerful a voice, or my presence isn't that electric...and I look at myself and say my goodness...you have them here for such a short while and you're discussing important things and how can all this really be happening?"

Studying the tapes helped her determine what was really happening. For example, Brian and I observed an early Ironweed lesson which Carol felt was a disaster. Yet, as she watched the tape, she realized what she saw did not match her feelings while teaching the lesson. Pressured and tired after arranging the visit of an actor, and very uncomfortable with the topic being discussed in front of the video camera, she felt the students were resisting because they, too, were uncomfortable. But the tape didn't show them resisting. They were quieter, but still attentive. After sharing her feelings with them, they admitted to her they were not as talkative because they did not understand some of the passages and did not know what she wanted. Carol was bothered by "what do you want" instead of "what I don't understand in this passage."

She relaxed and made a conscious decision then and there to slow down with this group and to take more time to help them puzzle out sections which confused them. They did not rush through the curriculum; in fact, they never did reach the final text, a Mary Gordon novel.

Whether Carol's lessons change because of her viewing the tapes of her classes is not clear. Nonetheless, the assignments she gives for Ironweed and The Color Purple focus more on the students' responses to the text. For example, when they read The Color Purple, each girl is required to choose two passages which are important to her and read them aloud to the group and then explain their significance. When the students compare two different texts in an essay, they do not have to focus on imagery but may select from a list of possible topics, or choose an idea which appeals to them. Many of them find issues that relate to their own lives to write about.

Anxious to check out Carol's perception that the girls are more involved and more confident as the semester progresses, I return alone to their class on Visitor's Day in April, when two grandmothers join the group to hear the students share ideas from their recently written comparison essays. They are like frolicking young fillies, tossing ideas rapidly, slapping hands flat on the table to make their points as they talk over one another.

"Whoa! Let's stay with that idea for a moment," Carol admonishes.

They are eager to discuss the behavior of female characters in recent texts. Perhaps they are showing off a little for these grandmothers, but having watched other teenagers choose to gain attention by shocking the daylights out of their elders, this display is refreshing. And when Carol asks them, "Where have we been? Where are we going?" they know and can weave together ideas from the texts they have covered so far and predict some of the issues in their next book.

At the end of April, I return again for another lively discussion. Sitting at the table with her students, Carol reads a passage from Chapter 13 of The French Lieutenant's Woman and then encourages each student to give her reaction.

"I feel preached at," Lynn claims.

"I like it. Switching voices keeps me interested," rebuts Karen.

Caitlin interjects her idea and before the next student can continue Carol reminds them, "Stop. Stay with this idea. Explain what you mean."

When Carolyn comments that she likes to be thrown into a story and not be distracted by an author's asides, Barbara replies, "I understand. Some people use literature to escape. If they want history, they read a history book."

Beth adds, "I don't think any other writer could get away with this" and Karen responds, "Alice Walker sort of did with Nettie's letters." Analogies to Jane Austen, Tom Stoppard, Romancing the Stone, and Ironweed are sprinkled throughout this conversation--not to show off, but to make an explanation clearer. Occasionally, Carol asks, "Why is that important?" or "What else?" but the girls are really carrying the conversation and proving Carol's belief: "I say to the students, I need you, but you don't need me."

In May, Carol brings in lovely Victorian outfits from the school's collection and the students gather on the couches in front of the fireplace to examine the clothes as Carol reads passages from the text and asks them to imagine the main characters, Charles and Sarah, wearing different items.

"How would this dress affect the way Sarah sits or stands or walks?" Carol asks. But when she poses the question, "How is your behavior controlled by the clothing you wear today?" there is a long, uncomfortable silence; when no one responds, Carol moves on to another question.

Their avoidance of Carol's question reminds me of a discussion about feminism she and I had earlier. At that time Carol said both she and the school had a concern for the feminist perspective and the role of women but the girls "sometimes feel it's being pushed at them to such a degree that it can be a turn off." As a consequence, Carol does not add texts to her curriculum because they are written by women or because they present a positive role model for her students to follow. She would rather say, "Look at these different women that emerge from our reading. Do you see any connection between or among them? What kind of lives do they create for themselves?" And her students respond to those kinds of questions with enthusiasm.

So what do the students learn from being in Carol's class? Yes, they can locate significant imagery which they know will please their teacher. If they don't feel too uncomfortable, they can find issues in a text that have some bearing on their own lives and use the discussions as a way of exploring inchoate beliefs. After a carefully orchestrated discussion in which Carol tries to give everyone a chance to be heard, they can learn to feel good about their contributions or their insights. But most of all--and I'm afraid this will seem heretical--they appear to be learning that stories are one of the amenities of life and that it is fun to read them or hear them or talk about them with friends.

When I observe Carol's classes, the talk reminds me of my own monthly book group. I am not reminded of a typical high school classroom. In all the time I observe, I never once see girls passing notes, furtively reading "Cliffs Notes," doodling in their notebooks, secretly finishing homework for another class, or giggling about an issue that has nothing to do with Contemporary Fiction (these behaviors, by the way, I observe in my own classes). I do not hear Carol or her students wallow in terminology like foreshadowing or recurring motifs. I do not see any pop quizzes to check homework or multiple choice tests covering plot or character identification details. What I do observe are students reading books and discussing their reading as if they actually enjoyed what they were doing.

Interrupting occasionally to remind students to expand or elaborate on an idea, Carol Johnson models a way to discuss literature. The young women imitate her civility. Because she tries not to dominate the discussion, never pretends to be all-knowing, never mocks a student's answer, in fact, never for a minute forgets what it feels like to be a student, the young women feel their ideas acknowledged and accepted. A student tries to persuade others of the validity of her opinion but does not expect to win converts. Free to maintain her beliefs, even if they are shocking, a student feels affirmed in Carol's class. And this affirmation is an essential stage if she is to reach her full development as a woman who thinks for herself.

Seven months after our first visit to Chestnut Hill, I encounter Brian on the way to his

English class.

"So, what do you remember most about Chestnut Hill?"

"The architecture." He grins. "And I remember the students talking more than the teacher."

"What if I tell you that the statistics show the teacher held the floor more than the students?"

Brian shakes his head, impatiently. "Look. In my class Mr. Nathan talks and talks and talks and talks. Then he asks a question. And the student says, 'Huh?' No one is talking about ideas about God or parallel universes."

Videotape Studies of Classroom Discussion (a series of reports). Six teacher-researchers, working collaboratively with university faculty, videotaped literature lessons of English teachers perceived by their colleagues to be outstanding. Subsequently, the researchers wrote interpretive analyses of their observations. Each narrative is available separately.

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This report explores one teacher's conviction that guided response to literary texts ultimately makes students better independent readers.

2.8 The Teacher as Mentor-Guide: Joe Allen ... ntigone.
Doris Quick, $4.00.

This teacher-researcher describes how the seemingly trivial or obvious questions students ask each other in a nondirected peer group discussion actually constitute a valid and valuable learning experience.