

Engaging Honors Students through Newspaper Blackout Poetry

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The frustration in the classroom was palpable and familiar. We were reading Anne Carson's translation of Sappho's poetry, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, in the first semester of our Honors Civilizations sequence. The students balked at the absence of text, the lack of a story line, a missing hero, the paucity of biographical information on Sappho, the seeming waste of paper where only one word appeared on a page, and the whole idea of poetry. Poetry was not their thing, some claimed, when asked if this genre appealed to them. Even to honors educators who have the privilege of teaching bright, curious, and engaged students, this assertion is all too familiar. The challenge is to convince students otherwise: to demonstrate pedagogically that poetry can be their thing and also to show them how much it can shape the way they think about the world and their place in it.

The funny thing is that, just minutes before the students started complaining about reading Sappho's poetry, most of them had removed ear buds and turned off any number of electronic devices streaming sound, mostly music. They did not yet see a connection between Sappho's lyrical poetry and the lyrics of the songs they had just been listening to. Making that connection for them opened the door for critical understandings of Sappho's work, its evocative imagery, and its ability to give voice to the same deep and confounding feelings of love and desire that the students were experiencing.

At the same time, even as students were shown Sappho's legacy as a lyric poet—for example, the connection between Sappho's seventh-century BCE "you burn me" (Carson 77) and Peggy Lee's twentieth-century *Fever* (Moxley)—they retained a general sense of alienation from the text every time I taught it. In 2009, a student in one of my classes offered a solution: perhaps everyone in the class could try creating love poems themselves using a technique known as "newspaper blackout."

Austin Kleon claims in his introduction to *Newspaper Blackout* (2010) that "petty crime, writer's block and the Internet" gave rise to this technique of creating poetry. A stack of newspapers brimming with words, a writer's inability to string together his own, and a permanent marker led Kleon to the discovery of poems waiting to be revealed in the columns of print ranging from headline

stories to sports pages. The technique is like a wood carving where the excess wood is removed to reveal the object hidden inside. A wood carver I knew claimed, “You have to throw away what doesn’t belong to it. And then you have the bird” (Ladenheim 19). Kleon describes the process likewise with newspaper blackout poems:

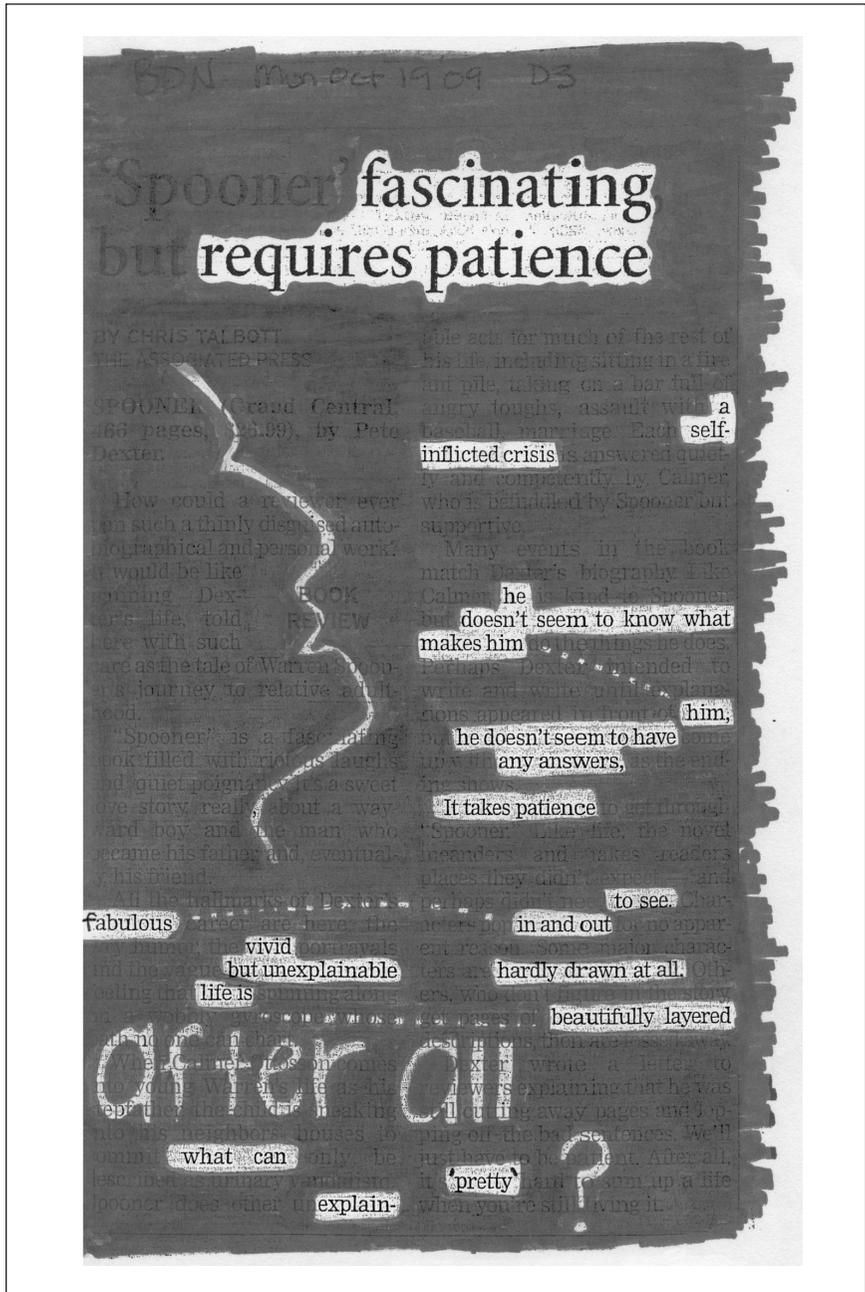
What’s exciting about the poems is that by *destroying* writing you can *create* new writing. You can take a stranger’s random words and pick and choose from them to express your own personal vision. (xv)

At its most basic, newspaper blackout poetry involves crossing out the words you do not want. Any newspaper article will work as, in fact, will any piece of writing. The point is that you have only the words, letters, punctuation, and spaces in the chosen piece to work with.

With the selected newspaper article, a permanent marker, and a charge to create a poem on love, with no particular kind of love specified, students went to work. The results were a range of poems with a range of quality. More importantly, though, what emerged from the exercise was a pattern in the words chosen by the students: a kind of language of love that was not necessarily Sappho’s language of violets, honey, and apples but nonetheless patterned evocations of the same experiences she struggled to articulate. Students understood that the words they had chosen embodied and reflected the feelings they were trying to capture in their poems, and they consequently became more attentive to Sappho’s use of language in hers. They also became conscious of what the poems looked like on the page and to the spaces between the words and phrases, both the black ones in their poems (see Figure 1) and the blank ones in Sappho’s, seeing them less as absence and more as potential. Rather than continuing to castigate Carson’s efforts to privilege all the words Sappho spoke (as she repeatedly gives a single word or two its own page) as a waste of paper, students began to wonder what might have been there before time and fear ravaged the texts.

To say that the exercise made poets out of all the students would be an exaggeration, but I can claim, based on both their poems and their reflections on the experience, that it provided them a novel way of thinking about Sappho’s work as well as their own. The exercise was challenging, but students also described it as “intriguing”; it allowed them entry into the poet’s struggle to capture the transcendent in the mundane of language. While they still did not know much of Sappho’s biography—was she married? a mother? a lesbian?—they did come to know Sappho better as a poet. One student, herself a poet, reflected both on her experience creating the newspaper blackout poem and on Sappho: “It made me appreciate that my poetry is not decayed or burnt largely out of existence, and it made me wonder whether Sappho would have welcomed new interpretations of her work as a result of fragmenting, or if she would experience the same frustration I do.” Another student commented, “Although writing the blackout

Figure 1. Example of a Newspaper Blackout Poem Created by Elizabeth Wood in November 2012 from an article by Chris Talbott in the *Bangor Daily News* on October 19, 2009



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poetry was difficult, I definitely learned a great deal more about the works we have read by writing them.”

Transcription of the newspaper blackout poem in Figure 1:

fascinating
requires patience
a
self-
inflicted crisis
he
doesn't seem to know what
makes him
him,
he doesn't seem to have
any answers.
It takes patience
to see
fabulous in and out
vivid but unexplainable hardly drawn at all
life is beautifully layered
after all
what can 'pretty'
explain?

The lines “he doesn't seem to have / any answers, / It takes patience” draw attention to a larger dynamic in the honors classroom in which Sappho has been taught as part of a great books curriculum. Approximately half of the incoming class in any given year is made up of students enrolled in the College of Engineering and College of Natural Sciences, Forestry, and Agriculture, students who are generally accustomed to and comfortable with more concrete ways of approaching knowledge and finding answers. In no way am I saying that any one discipline has a particular claim on poetry or on unpacking its mysteries, but I do see different kinds of expertise and academic comfort zones among the students gathered around the table in honors, students for whom answers are an expected outcome of their work. These kind of experiences in honors can provide them an alternative model for thinking about questions that do not necessarily have an answer, however patient they may be.

Further, what characterizes the experience of all the students in our Honors Civilizations sequence is the pace at which we move through the curriculum. In the first semester alone, we cover several thousand years of Western civilization from ancient Sumer to ancient Greece, with only two or maybe three classes allotted to each representative text. Finding creative ways to make these texts more accessible and immediate can facilitate the students' engagement with them and enhance what they take away from the readings. In my experience, using newspaper blackout poetry as an entrée to Sappho specifically and poetry (and prose) more generally has substantially enhanced student engagement with the texts.

An honors seminar creates the space for an interdisciplinary group of students to engage in activities such as blackout poetry that challenge them to confront the unknown and give them the skills to do so. Likewise, the honors classroom fosters opportunities for students to think deeply and critically about that experience, about its implications for not only taking texts apart in search of meaning but also for creating texts in search of understanding. The activity creates a shared experience of struggle since all students find the exercise more challenging than they imagined at the outset, and it also gives them a shared experience of revelation that is at the heart of an honors education.

The newspaper blackout poetry activity clearly resonated with my honors students, and several have subsequently used this technique as a way of interpreting other works in our curriculum. Using the same technique employed in the classroom exercise, students have selected newspaper articles, blacked out the words they did not need, and created poems capturing some essence in the texts being studied. One example of their work is a blackout poem Samantha L. Paradis created titled "The Odyssey," which is based on the article "A feast for all to enjoy" published in the *Morning Sentinel*:

visitors
hectic scene
good food
sit enjoy it
cup is filled
dinner was successful
the king still alive at sea
the king's wife attending and staying
until together.

In the same paper on the next day, in an article titled "Voodoo soothes afflicted Haitians," Samantha discovered this poem that she titled "The Acropolis and 'From Marathon to Parthenon.'"

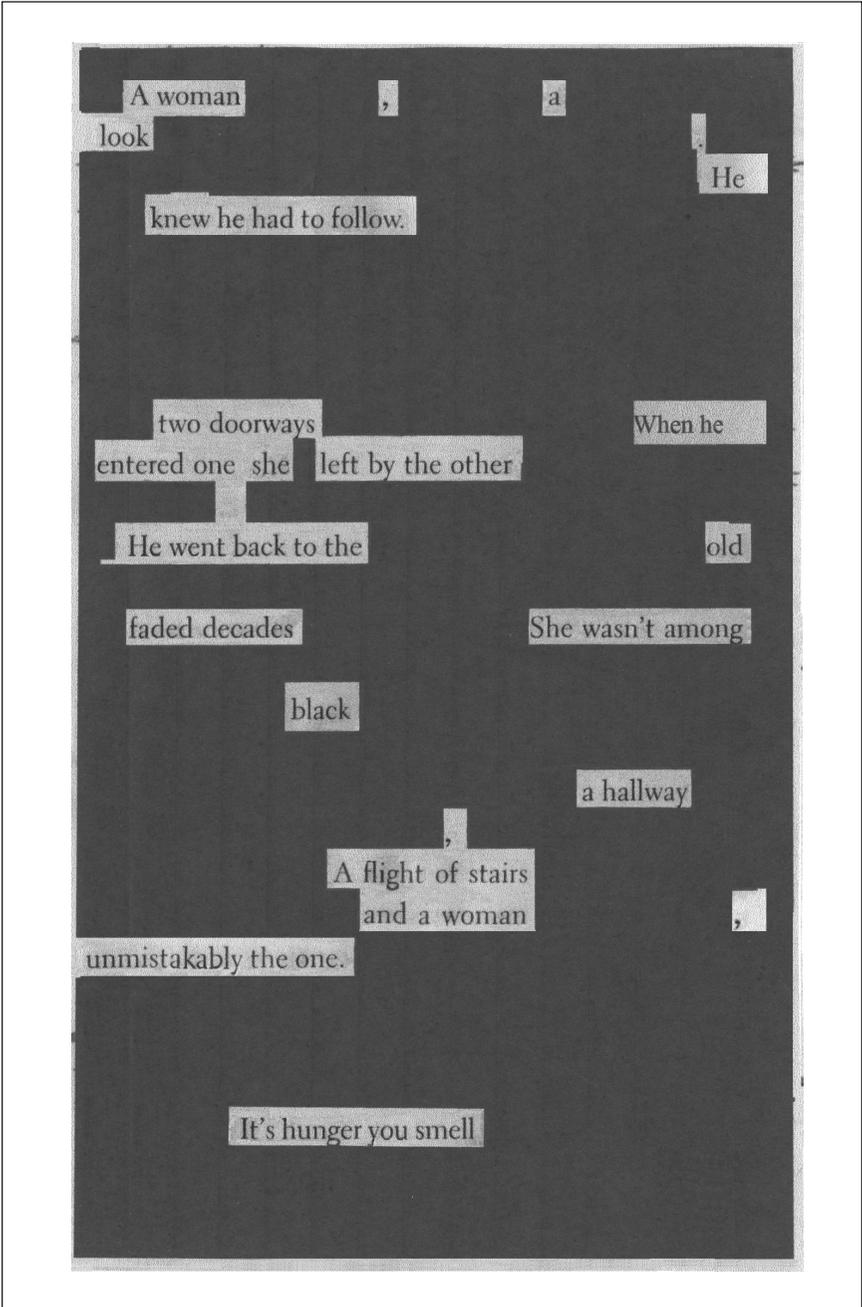
spirits
belief
sustenance to both the living and the dead
help cope with the disasters
the ruin and the death have left an impact
celebration in communities
pay respect for our brothers
many altars adorned
decorative

Another student used an article by Erik Brady on runner Usain Bolt featured in *USA Today* on April 6, 2011 to create her blackout poem about Jesus and the New Testament gospels:

"The Disciple"
Reach out for him,
call his name.
He belongs to His master plan.
God gives the world his greatest.
Both hands behind him,
perspiration on his back,
breathes hard for his people.
He is love.
People judge:
"That can't be real."
People will doubt a lot of things,
But I know within myself, in my heart,
He is God.

Nathan Lessard took a different approach in his use of blackout poetry. Instead of a newspaper, he used Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis: A Novel* and created poems "to exemplify the thematic commonalities between books." For example, his poem "1" (Figure 2) explores the theme of unrequited or unattainable love as it is found in Sappho's poetry as well as in other books in our curriculum such as *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*. Although told from the male perspective, for Lessard the poem easily conjures the experiences and illusions of Calypso and Dido and in the last stanza echoes of the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus.

Figure 2. Newspaper Blackout Poem by Nathan Lessard



Transcription of poem in Figure 2:

A woman,
a look,
He knew he had to follow.
Two doorways.
When he entered one,
She left by the other.
He went back to the old faded decades she wasn't among.
Black.
A hallway,
A flight of stairs,
And a woman,
Unmistakably the one.
It's hunger you smell.

My role as a teacher in honors is to guide my students through the seemingly distant and sometimes strange terrain of ancient texts we read in our curriculum. When the signposts are lacking, as in the remnants of Sappho's poetry translated in Carson's *If Not, Winter*, such guidance becomes more challenging as we try to take a text, especially one so fragmented, and not only make sense of it in its own time but also in ours. Grappling with questions like this, even when reading complete texts, drives our pedagogy as honors educators; it undergirds our efforts to engage students in the process of understanding the impulses and ideas in the work of others and, by extension, their own.

Using the technique of newspaper blackout poetry has proven to be a helpful and illuminating way of engaging the honors students I teach in the words of Sappho and in other texts as well; it has provided a different way of seeing the words on the paper and thus a different way of thinking about what those words communicate and why they matter. Like critical thinking, newspaper blackout poetry is a process of revelation, an uncovering of meaning. Pedagogically, blackout poetry makes students active participants in the construction of knowledge and understanding, one of the core objectives of honors education (Slavin 16); the honors classroom then becomes a model for "taking intellectual risks" (15) that build analytical skills and critical knowledge transferrable to other course work. This exercise will not make all students lovers of Sappho or even of poetry, but it will give them an opportunity for active encounters with texts and for discovery of meanings in an intentional and thoughtful way.

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