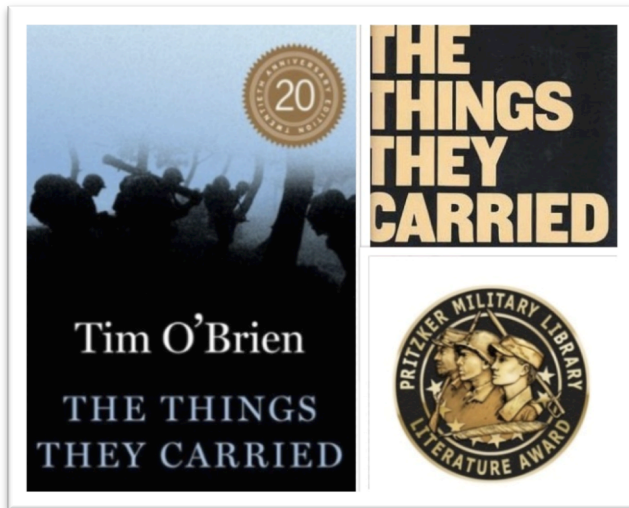


# Connecting Students with the Human Dimensions in Literature: Using Bruner’s Modes of Thought to Deepen Literary Appreciation

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## Abstract

*Many times students are directed to make a personal connection to literature without being guided toward how their connection works interdependently with the structure of the narrative to create a greater meaning, much less directed toward how this connection can hold meaning for their own lives. Through student samples, this article attempts to show how a combination of two different modes of thought gives teachers a framework for literary appreciation that facilitates a deeper understanding of the connections students make to the works they*

*read, as well as the way students apply the literature to their own lives*

*Keywords: teaching literature, appreciation, analytical reading, character analysis*

I got there early so that I could get a seat close to the front and sat eagerly waiting for the session to begin. On the stage in front of the seated crowd of English teachers was a long table, with two of the authors sitting and chatting as they waited for the session to start. No sign of O'Brien, and the panel discussion was scheduled to start in less than a minute. Did he cancel? But about two sentences into the welcoming, O'Brien walked quickly up the aisle wearing tennis shoes, jeans, a sport coat, and his signature baseball cap. A light applause arose—possibly from the respect bordering on reverence that so many of us felt for him and from sheer relief that he made it! I was certainly one of those who applauded as much out of relief as out of respect.

Tim O'Brien and two other authors of war novels discussed their work with a packed room at the 2011 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) convention in Chicago. When O'Brien spoke, I hung on every word and wrote furiously to capture some of my favorite quotations to take back to my students who were reading his Pulitzer Prize finalist novel about the Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried*. The session was everything I had hoped, and the questions from the audience were better than the ones I was too reluctant to ask. One question from an audience member in particular stayed with me, though: "Why do you think your novel impacts so many people who have never been to war, much less the Vietnam war?" As if the

question had been asked a hundred times, O'Brien responded, "Books are not just for communication; they are for human beings" (O'Brien, 2011).

The idea that books "are for human beings" is nothing new. We all connect at a level that makes us human—struggles, perseverance, and moments of joy and accomplishment are all human elements that keep us reading. Yet, as I reviewed my notes on the flight home, I could not help but think about this answer and how I would use his novel to support my students' understandings of the human connections and conflicts. This reflection gave me a new perspective on the connections I encourage students to make with their reading and, more importantly, a new perspective on how I ask students to approach writing that accompanies their reading. I have taught using the novel before, and generally my students comprehend the work but fail to appreciate what it has to offer them as human beings. As I sat on the plane, I realized that I was asking students to make connections to experiences, to external conflicts, instead of to the internal conflicts that make us human. I began to consider that a change in how I approach the novel might help students see how the work is intended just as much *for them* as it is for those people who have been to war.

This change in my approach also challenged how I scaffold background knowledge within my students to help them comprehend the work on multiple levels. We know that background knowledge is an important piece of comprehension (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Johnson-Laird, 1983; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983), and the more background knowledge a student has, the better he or she can comprehend the reading (Graves, Cooke, & LeBerge, 1983; Hood, 1981). But what if students have enough background knowledge to comprehend the work, yet do not have the experience necessary to appreciate the work on a higher level? While students can surely connect to some isolated experiences in the novel, meaningful connections that remind us we are all human beings and facilitate a deeper appreciation of the work are unlikely since high school students have no experience with war, much less with the Vietnam War.

However, human nature is universal, and so is the narrative structure of conflict development. The connection to human nature, to the vicissitudes of the human condition or the internal conflict, is a connection that calls forth an archetypal structure as opposed to one consisting of a string of isolated experiences or external conflicts, and holds greater meaning for the student while allowing for more authentic writing. This complex response to reading requires, as I will attempt to show, a conscientious effort to see just how novels are "for human beings." More precisely, in this article, I intend to argue (a) for using conflict development to create students' connection to the text through an exploration of human nature; (b) providing students an opportunity to share their own development as it relates to the connection of human nature; and (c) implementing specific instructional strategies.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings**

The appreciation of a novel through the connection of human nature and conflict development may be understood through Bruner's (1986) perspective on the power of narrative mode. Bruner (1986) lays out two modes of thinking: the paradigmatic mode and the narrative. While he claims that "there are confusions and overlaps" (p.88), he clearly delineates the two. The paradigmatic mode "employs categorization or conceptualization and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealized and related one to the other to form a system" (p. 12). We see the use of the paradigmatic mode in scientific formulas, mathematics, and logic, such as syllogistic reasoning. The narrative modes, however, deals with the "vicissitudes of human intentions" (p.16) and reach conclusions that are happy, sad, absurd, or

any other number of endings. The paradigmatic mode, conversely, is “simply conclusive or inconclusive” (Bruner, 1986, p. 14).

For the narrative mode, Bruner (1986) argues that the same stories can be told in a different order because “there must be transformations of some kind that permits a common base structure of story to be handled in different meaning-preserving sequences” (p.19). He even goes as far as to identify certain aspects of plot development and questions the intent to structure plot development since really what “one seeks in story structure is precisely how plight, character, and consciousness are integrated” (p. 21).

But what if you did define this base story structure as archetypal? What if we define a convention that lattices the two modes and disrupts the binary, allowing the reader to see how an archetypal narrative structure creates universal feelings that give the reader not only a connection to the work through the “vicissitudes of human intentions” (p. 16) that Bruner (1986) claims are elicited within the narrative mode, but also an archetypal structure—internal conflict creates the external conflict or vice versa and a resolution that represents an underlying message or theme—that is formulaic like the paradigmatic mode. The student can then apply this same structure to construct his or her own reality centered on his or her own *vicissitudes* or to see how his or her reality could be different. This latter point would be evident in the purposeful writing that comes from the connection to human nature within the reading and the archetypal structure used to organize their analysis and narrative. By focusing on the development of internal conflict, the vicissitudes of human intentions (narrative), using an archetypal structure (paradigmatic mode), then the student is directed toward a deeper understanding of how the novel is written for human beings and not just for those who have experienced war, or any other context within a novel that does not represent your students’ background.

## Responding to Literature

Discussing the power of the narrative and the possibilities it can present, Arendt (2007) points out “that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it...” (p. 9). Philip Jackson (1995) notes that stories “leave us with altered states of consciousness, new perspectives, changed outlooks” (p. 9), a notion which Breault (2010) takes even further, stating that “someone’s story can provide not only insight into that person but might also help that person more constructively reconcile various personal issues” (p. 181). Having your students question the literature in a meaningful way that changes their perspectives is the type of literary appreciation that English teachers seek (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997; Liang & Dole, 2006). At the same time, prior knowledge and experience aid in comprehension and engagement, and guiding students to make these connections can benefit them (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; L’Allier & Elish-Piper, 2007; Rumelhart, 1980). However, often times when students question the text and make connections to isolated experiences, or external conflicts, within the story, the response sometimes does not make connections to the work as a whole, which hinders a deeper understanding of the work (Langer, 1990, 1995). Therefore, the readers’ analysis of the work becomes weak and strained, and the ability to facilitate a lasting effect on the student becomes remote.

Bruner (1986) also suggests that these isolated connections hinder a deeper understanding of the work. He claims that “[e]motion is not usefully isolated from the knowledge of the situation that arouses it” and, referring to emotion, cognition, and actions, further notes that we cannot “lose sight of their structural interdependence” (p. 117-118). Making connections to isolated experiences can keep the reader from seeing the structural interdependence of the

narrative and the integral role that the narrative plays in conveying the message, or in this case, the reader's response. However, making connections to the "vicissitudes of human nature"—internal conflicts instead of external conflicts—provides a very different learning opportunity. When we ask students to make connections to specific emotions (human nature), then what is the sequence, the conflict development that is behind the emotion conveyed? Answering this question will require students to see how the narrative structure conveys a deeper meaning, since he or she will look for internal and external conflicts and how these conflicts are resolved, a process, which leads to a thematic message.

Zigo (2001) suggests that "natural inclinations toward narrative forms of meaning making, in conjunction with text-based lessons" can help with engaging students with "challenging" texts (p. 64). This engagement is important for canonical works of literature that often present stories that students can understand but have a hard time appreciating on a higher level of thinking due to a lack of experience. For example, students may comprehend Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* or Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, but the horrors of World War I and the wastefulness of the elite in the 1920s may very well be hard for them to internalize and appreciate simply because they lack the experience.

However, to increase the ability for students to have a deeper appreciation, the responses can be directed at the elements of human nature first, or the internal conflict—the feeling of guilt, anger, sorrow, etc. These feelings stem from or cause some "vicissitude" and "human intention," as Bruner (1986) would note, within the narrative, which can fit neatly into the paradigmatic mode of conflict development. When students identify this development after identifying the connection to human nature—the feeling that they share as a human being instead of an isolated experience that may or may not hold meaning to the text—then the student not only begins to have a deeper understanding, but naturally begins to develop an ability for discussing and writing analytically about the novel. More important, the student adds to the reality of how these human interactions, these vicissitudes, are resolved. This gives the student possible realities that can be constructed for his or her own narratives, and a possible model—or world, as Bruner (1986) would label it—for the student to replicate in reality.

## Expanding Our Worlds through Writing

Egan (1999) argues that a story is "one of the most powerful and effective sustainer of cultures across the world" (p. 16). We learn about our past from stories, about different cultures and ideas. Literature allows us to see through many perspectives and takes us on journeys that are otherwise impossible. These experiences, as I have argued earlier, have the ability to change us, and simply participating in narrative discourse practices leads us to a better understanding of who we are within our own cultures (Miller, 1994). I presume that Bruner (1986) would agree, since he claims that literature gives us "human possibilities rather than settled certainties" (p. 26) and "opens us to dilemmas, to the hypothetical, to the range of possible worlds that a text can refer to" (p. 159).

Along with scaffolding the writing structure for the students, this approach also instills a purpose for writing their own stories, a purpose that can be self-fulfilling, or as Bruner (1986) would point out, can create possible worlds. Talking about these possibilities, Pipher (2006) argues writing "enlarges readers' knowledge of the world or empowers readers to act for the common good" (p. 7). Bruner agrees: "Psychological reality is revealed when a distinction made in one domain—language, modes of organizing human knowledge, whatever—can be shown to have a base in the psychological processes that people use in negotiating their transactions with

the world” (p. 9). He further notes that “our experience of nature is shaped by conceptions of it formed in discourse with others” (p. 88). Having students see the development of human nature through an archetypal structure gives them the opportunity to see multiple possibilities for their own story structure and to choose a possibility that will play out on their own pages and, maybe, eventually become their reality.

Leading students to find the power behind stories often takes place when they have their own stories to tell. If we could use the reading connections within both modes of thinking, then not only do we raise an awareness of the themes within the work, but we also instill a sense of purpose for writing within the student. Here, the connection to the literature becomes not only the starting point for a possible story, but the archetypal structure also scaffolds the organizational pattern. The connection to human nature and an understanding of the conflict development becomes the prewriting for two different writing assignments: a literary analysis and a personal narrative. The former analyzes the conflict development of a character—how an external conflict creates an internal conflict, or vice versa, and how the resolution reveals the theme—and the latter is simply the development of the students own vicissitudes within a narrative that allows the students to explore possible resolutions.

### **Putting this into Practice**

Reading and writing help us access one another, as well as help us access and articulate ourselves. The lesson that follows attempts to facilitate this process using the novel *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien. Using student samples, this section of the article shows how the students took their connections and the structure of conflict development to create their own literary analyses and narratives. In an attempt to connect literature and writing instruction in a way that produces better readers and writers, this lesson also highlights writing as an act of composing rooted in and analyzing students’ own lives, starting with the connections they make to human nature within literature.

### **Background**

In my tenth year of teaching, I taught the following lesson to six on-level eleventh-grade classes at a Title I school in Houston, TX. The lesson came within the unit titled “The Aesthetics of War in Literature” during the second half of the first semester. The students had done analytical writing leading up to this point, and the majority of the reading for the lesson was done in class. For part of the unit, the classes read *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien, a novel about the Vietnam War. O’Brien tells the story through a collection of vignettes, which include many soldier characters. Each character is dealing with the unthinkable stresses and horrors of war that produce internal conflicts and weigh heavily on the soldiers.

### **Prewriting and the Dialectical Journal**

Once the students had a basic outline of the issues surrounding the Vietnam War and the impact the war had on the soldiers, I read aloud the first chapter of O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, stopping from time to time to check comprehension and discuss anything that might be interesting or confusing. During this time, I also modeled the dialogue I wanted students to have with the author by questioning the text as we read. With a renewed perspective that books “are written for human beings,” I also asked them to make a personal connection to the human feelings that they shared with the characters who appeared in their responses.

The examples in Table 1 show the students questioning the text concerning character development, as well as the connections they made to the feelings the characters exhibit. Each of the selected examples were passages chosen by the students.

Table 1  
Student examples: dialectical journal entries

Passages from the text	Comments & Questions
<p>“He hesitated for a second. ‘And do me a favor. Don’t mention anything about – ‘No,’ I said, ‘I won’t’” (O’Brien, 1990, p. 29).</p>	<p>What was Jimmy Cross hiding? I think Jimmy wanted to seem like a complete good guy in the story and he still loved Martha, hoping one day she would read the story – and didn’t want her to know what he had done, what ever it was. I have stories and feelings that I don’t want people to know because I’m scared they might think differently about me.</p>
<p>“No safe ground: enemies everywhere. No front or rear. At night had trouble sleeping...” (O’Brien, 1990, p. 60).</p>	<p>What is he truly scared of? Is he scared of what Strunk is going to do to him or scared of dying in the war? I think he is feeling isolated. I’ve felt isolated even when I’m around people because I fear they don’t like me or that I don’t fit in.</p>
<p>She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill” (O’Brien, 1990, p. 110).</p>	<p>Mary Anne went from being a sweet loving and caring girl to this trained killing machine. War changes even the weakest of people into crazy heartless monsters. What happens to a person in war that makes them change? One thing that changed me completely was the death of my grandfather. I realized how important our time together was.</p>

These dialectical journal entries were later used for students to see how the characters cope with their internal conflicts, and, in the end, how the resolution of their internal struggles connects to the novel’s theme. (This is evident in the student samples in Table 2.) Essentially, this became the organization of their literary analysis and their own story.

### Organizing the Development

After reading the novel, I presented the students with the following essay challenge: Choose a character and examine how the development of internal conflict conveys the author’s message about the impact war has on the human spirit. I asked them to look for a character that exhibits feelings of human nature or an internal conflict that elicited a connection. Did you note feelings of sadness, guilt, anger, or any other feelings that you’re grappling with in your life, or

have grappled with in the past? I asked them to go back into the text and their dialectical journals and find areas where the character's internal conflict was created by an external conflict or if their internal conflict created an external conflict. (This fleshes out any connections that are not developed, which inherently will not connect to theme.)

Once the students chose their characters, I had them look at ways to organize the development of the character using the handful of journal entries and textual evidence they had collected. Considering the complexity of essay assignment, I provided models of the end product, along with my own brainstorming of possible organizational patterns. I then asked them to organize the development and expand on their analysis in a discussion or short written responses. For example, in Lt. Cross's mind, Jimmy Cross's unrequited love for Martha (internal conflict) is responsible for Lavender's death (external conflict). It could also be argued, as the student below presents, that the sense of loneliness stemming from the external separation due to war is just as much a part of it. I review similar examples with the students and show them model essays I have written on the many different approaches that can be taken—similar to the two mentioned here.

However, what proved to be the most helpful in getting students to organize their thinking about their chosen character was to have them answer specific questions: (a) What internal conflict is your character dealing with? (b) What external conflict is causing or is caused by the internal conflict? (c) To what extent, if any, does the internal conflict impact the character? (d) To what extent, if any, does the character resolve the internal conflict?

Expanding on the samples from the students in Table 1, Table 2 displays the organizational patterns of conflict development of the chosen characters. These outlines were created as a result of the questions above.

Table 2  
Student samples of organizing conflict development

Characters	Outline
Jimmy Cross	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The war separates Jimmy Cross from Martha and creates loneliness</li> <li>• The loneliness distracts Jimmy Cross as Lavender is shot</li> <li>• Death of Lavender creates guilt within Jimmy Cross</li> <li>• Resolution = still grapples with the guilt today</li> </ul>
Dave Jenson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jenson and Strunk make a pact out of the need to show no fear, which is a product of the war</li> <li>• Strunk loses his leg, and Jenson disobeys the agreement out of compassion for Strunk</li> <li>• Resolution = death of Strunk, which brings relief to Jenson</li> <li>• Death is the only escape from the perils of war</li> </ul>
Mary Anne Bell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mary Anne symbolizes the transformation that war creates.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mary Anne is first curious to explore the war</li> <li>• She starts losing love for Fossie and gains love for war</li> <li>• Her love turns into obsession, and she eventually disappears</li> <li>• Resolution = all soldiers leave a part of them in war behind and come back changed.</li> </ul>
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### Drafting

As I moved from student to student, I read essays that were focused on the development of the internal conflict and how the resolution contributes to theme. While it may seem highly structured, the approach allows the analysis to be more accessible for the students. Writing about Jimmy Cross's inability to resolve his internal struggle, a student states:

He has no one else to blame but himself. He wishes to replace his sense of shame and hatred for himself but disappointingly he can't, and has to live with it. After Lavender's death, Cross continues to blame himself, and the absence of forgiveness illustrates the effect war has on his spirit. This marks the beginning of his never-ending guilt. Even though, during any war, death is expected to pay a couple of visits every now and then, witnessing its arrival is always startling, harsh, and frightening.

The student then concludes the essay, "The incessant and permanent guilt of Lavender's death will forever remain with Lt. Jimmy Cross."

The second student who chose to write about Dave Jenson and his dilemma of following through on a promise writes:

There was fear of death; but the fear of shame would kill them five times over. Jenson would be the blame of Strunk's humiliation because he didn't go by his word and pull the trigger. Lee Strunk's death saved Jenson's life. In Tim O'Brien's words, 'Later we heard that Strunk died somewhere over Chu Lai, which seemed to relieve Dave Jenson of an enormous weight.' And it did. (O'Brien 63)

What I also enjoyed seeing was that this student creatively organized the essay using subtitles. The title of the essay is "Death is the Only Escape," and after the introduction, she uses the subtitle "Pact of Machismo" before describing the agreement both Strunk and Jenson make. The next section is titled "The Injury," which presents Strunk losing his leg and further develops the internal conflict of Jenson having to make good on his agreement. The final section of the essay is titled "Relief in War," and shows how the true internal conflict of Jenson was his own recanting of the agreement, and how the death of his friend relieved him of that guilt.

Mary Anne Bell's character is one of the more difficult to write about because students have a hard time grappling with the abstract idea her character represents. However, the third student writes well about her internal conflict and the abstract resolution: "This internal conflict she had been dealing with was finally resolved. She may not have been at peace with herself, but she was at peace with Vietnam, she became a part of it." The student continues and shows a deeper understanding of the character:

Being in the war environment made her glow in the dark. She couldn't get enough. She didn't only need more of the war; she desired it and started craving it. Mary Anne's tongue necklace represents her desire to be a part of the war culture. She is brainwashed, and is willing to be taken in by the jungle and to learn more.



I believe the insight in these samples comes from an understanding of how the structure of conflict development works interdependently to create an underlying message, which allows them to expand on their thoughts.

### **Application**

Once I handed back the papers and had the students write their final drafts, we moved on to the next unit, which included elements of narrative writing. After a few weeks of reading various short stories and personal essays, I had the students go back to their writing portfolios and pull out their character analysis essays over *The Things They Carried* and look at the full process, from the dialectical journal entries to their final draft. I had them look at the internal conflicts they discussed in their essays and the feelings they made connections to in their journal entries, such as guilt, fear, anger, hate, love. I also had them look at the external issues that were causing these internal conflicts, such as death, violence, rejection, separation.

Then I asked them to answer a few questions: What were the outcomes of the characters you wrote about who dealt with similar internal conflicts? Does that resolution sound appealing? If not, how can you avoid it? What's important during this process is that the students now analyze their own internal conflicts so that they can develop it within a narrative that properly conveys their struggles. Students then mapped out possible outcomes and looked at how the choices they made are to blame for their consequences or the consequences that could be attached to a current path they are on.

The three students whose examples have been used throughout this piece all wrote narratives that came from the connections they made to the reading. The student who wrote about Jimmy Cross examined some of the choices he has made based on what others think of him and how those choices could possibly change him in the future. The student who wrote about Jenson's fear wrote about the development of her own fear that stemmed from inadequacy, which created a false reality. She went on to realize that much of her fear was her own making, and that in reality, she was very well liked by the students around her. The third student wrote a beautiful story about coming to terms with his grandfather's death. Throughout the prewriting and drafting stages of this process, I noticed that all of the students had at least one story to tell, and many had multiple stories. But what impressed me most was that the stories did not feel contrived. Instead, they were authentic, natural. The students also had an easier time finding the right moments to detail, and their conclusions had more depth and showed an understanding of resolve.

### **Closing Thoughts**

While only those who have been to war can truly understand its impact, I do hope that this novel gives my students a better understanding of the horrors the soldiers endure. Applying O'Brien's point that "books are for human beings" not only gives my students an understanding of the experiences of war, but also an understanding of human nature and how people cope with their trials. As teachers, we seem to constantly struggle to make those connections to experiences, and we forget that those experiences, whether the reader went through something similar or not, create feelings to which we can all relate.

At the close of the NCTE session, I waited in line to get Mr. O'Brien's autograph, and when I approached the signing area, I was star struck, to say the least. I wanted to tell him that I had read his novel in a Vietnam War Literature class and decided that I wanted to talk about beautifully written novels for the rest of my life. I wanted to tell him that I had read plenty of

novels, but not until his work did I decide to use my English literature degree for something other than law school. I wanted to tell him so much, but I left it for another time.

Instead, I asked him something else. I knew I only had time to make a statement or ask a question, so as he signed my book I said, “My students have to know, did the narrator keep his promise at the end of the chapter ‘Love’?” He smiled and said, “I don’t know. I think the possibilities are endless. It’s fiction.” He chuckled as he continued, “I’m not sure you should even tell your students that.” We shook hands, and I left feeling like I missed an opportunity to share with him just how much his work means to me. However, looking back, I’m so glad I asked him the question my students wanted to know, because its answer holds so much more for them.

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