

By Susan F. Zachary

Literacy, Poetry, and the Arts: Listening to the Sound of Your Soul

Abstract

Incorporating the arts into the classroom through the study of poetry and writing can improve literacy with the connection to the lyrical movement of dance, music, and art. Through the arts, teachers can guide students in exploring figurative language, tone, rhythm, and imagery as it pertains to the arts and its relationship to the voice and passion of the writer. Using Patrick Henry's *Speech to the House of Commons*, we compare the movement of words across the page to the movement of dance or a work of art. Using different types of poetry, including Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and T.S. Eliot's "The Naming of Cats," we explore how performing and visual arts can make those connections that bridge the gap in students' understanding of figurative language, tone, and symbolism. Finally, as educators, we look at our responsibility of instilling in our students the importance of literacy. We must encourage our students to find their passion in life, and incorporating the arts in our classrooms through music, art, dance—through words—is one avenue in making this generation's students true learners for life.

Keywords: poetry, movement, passion, art, dance

The 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement. The Hippie Movement. The Beatles. As a 14-year-old just entering high school in 1965, I found myself trying to understand my role in a generation that experienced a major change in American culture. Baby boomers rebelled against the ideas of their parents' generation and demanded more freedom; music, art, and literature became

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the vehicle for their expression. This was a generation searching for new ideas, and literature and the arts became their voice. While the cultural/music genres shifted from the bubble gum sounds of Lesley Gore and rockabilly drawl of Elvis to a more rebellious outcry for love, peace, and equality, the arts and literature reflected their view of the social and political world. Despite the changes that this generation experienced, we all had a dream, and we expressed our dreams best through these artistic expressions. Today, these radical ideas of the '60s have become the norm in 21st century education, and music, art, and dance continue to play a major role as a cross-curricular tool for improving literacy and bridging the past with the present.

Research shows that the implementation of all areas of the arts into school curriculum has contributed to gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skills. The arts also improves motivation, concentration, confidence, and teamwork. A 2005 report by the Rand Corporation argues that "the intrinsic pleasures and stimulation of the art experience ... can connect people more deeply to the world and open them to new ways of seeing," which creates "the foundation to strengthen social bonds and community cohesion" (Smith, 2009, p. 1). It is through literature and art and music and dance that teachers can help students understand what it means to be human, to learn important lessons and values, and to explore and make

As an experienced English teacher and administrator, I have always encouraged students to make this connection between the more traditional works we read in class and their own current life experiences by exploring the movement of writing, literature, and poetry. I have encouraged them to understand the passion of this connection between the arts and literature by listening and connecting to the sound of their souls.

connections through different contexts of the arts. As we continue to mold our 21st century literacy curriculum and pedagogy that make these life connections, we cannot, however, lose sight of what traditional literature of the past provides. Craig D. Jerald (2009), in his article “Defining a 21st Century Education” for the Center for Public Education, affirms that “applied literacies and broader competencies are best taught in the context of the academic curriculum, not as a replacement for it” but within traditional disciplines that strengthen such skills as “abstractions, analysis, and synthesis” (p. 23) that are “creative and innovative and organized” (p. 45). As an experienced English teacher and administrator, I have always encouraged students to make this connection between the more traditional works we read in class and their own current life experiences by exploring the movement of writing, literature, and poetry. I have encouraged them to understand the passion of this connection between the arts and literature by listening and connecting to the sound of their souls. My intent is to share some of these strategies that I have incorporated into the classroom over the years in order to enhance student literacy and to help students connect the past to the present. By incorporating the arts into the study of literature in numerous creative ways, students have learned that whether reading a book or writing a paper, they are always involved in the movement and melody of the work.

Syntactical Style and Movement

One way that I have found successful is through the syntactical study of the writer’s style of communicating with his audience. After selecting just the right words to convey meaning, a writer must arrange these words to best express his intent. This arrangement of words is called syntax. The syntactical movement of words across the page is like the graceful movement of a dance, my metaphor for writing. Both have a beginning, middle, and end. Both must incorporate transitions to make the work flow

coherently from one idea or movement to another. Both demand that we hear the passion and voice of the work. Look at the syntactical movement in paragraph 4 of Patrick Henry’s “Speech in the Virginia Convention”:

... I ask gentlemen, sir, what means this martial array, if its purpose be not to force us to submission? Can gentlemen assign any other possible motive for it? Has Great Britain any enemy in this quarter of the world to call for all this accumulation of navies and armies? **No, sir, she has none** (emphasis added). They are meant for us: they can be meant for no other. (Applebee et al., 2000, p. 262)

Through the use of rhetorical devices such as repetition, sentence structure, and variety, Henry creates a passionate work that moves from a controlled logical tone with sophisticated complex sentences to the use of the rhetorical question that poses doubt, to the exclamatory sentence that evokes the pathos of immediate action. Through the use of strong action verbs, such as *petitioned*, *remonstrated*, *supplicated*, *prostrated*, he establishes the action that must take place and weaves the lyrical movement of logos, ethos, and pathos with formal declarative sentences that establishes his claim; to a series of interrogative and imperative sentences, where he commands his audience to think about the consequences; to the short simple sentence, the attention-getter, between a series of long sentences, to establish the core of his message.

Henry’s tone intensifies in the last two paragraphs, using a series of exclamatory sentences intertwined with interrogative ones that sound like guns firing—rat-a-tat-tat—to emphasize his central thesis, “Give me liberty or give me death!” As one of my students remarked after we had completed the study of this work and I had asked the class to comment about Henry’s effectiveness of the lyrical movement of the work: “Man, Mrs. Z., I feel like we just fought the battle ourselves. My brain hurts, but I’m fired up, no pun intended!” This is the passion that I want students to feel as they make connections about literature or compose their own compositions.

Poetry and Song

Another of my favorite approaches to instilling this passion for literature is through the study of poetry and its connection with music and song lyrics. Poetry and song lyrics have many similarities. Both are emotional, depend on the strong use of language, and embody rhyme and the use of imagery. Making connections between the poetry we study and students’ current music playlists bridges that gap in understanding figurative language, tone, and symbolism. Historically, poetry and song were originally one art form (Kennedy & Gioia, 2000). Today, these two forms remain closely related in the beauty of a poem through its “music” and the poetic quality of a great song lyric. Primarily rhythmical, poetry echoes this rhythm base in life. In the words of Maya Angelou, poetry is “music written for the human voice” (Strachan & Terry, 2011, p. 192). To make poetry more relevant,

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students must experience this relationship between the music and its lyrics.

One of my student's first assignments is to bring to class the printed lyrics of one of their favorite songs. Using John Crowe Ransom's poem "Janet Waking" as a model, we analyze the poem for figurative language, imagery, tone, and theme. After reading and paraphrasing each stanza, students annotate the poem by first placing squares around all of the concrete nouns and then analyzing these images to determine the denotative interpretation of the poem, a story about a young girl from a very close family who awakens to find that her pet hen has died from a bee sting. To reinforce the imagery and language of the poem, students circle all of the abstract nouns, action verbs, adjectives, and adverbs to establish the poem's connotative interpretation and its effect on the tone. This activity reinforces how both positive and negative words control the shift in the poem's rhythm and mood. Words at the beginning of the poem, such as *beautifully*, *shining*, *running*, and *dainty*, suggest that Janet's life is a loving one. Beginning at the end of stanza three, however, Ransom provides a hint of a more somber tone with the words *but alas*, *died*, *droning*, *crying*, *venom*, *weeping*, *implored*, *rigor*, *death*, moving the poem from its literal meaning to a more figurative interpretation. Analyzing the definitions of the words "transmogrifying" and "translated" highlights the poem's intention of not just "to translate" or "to change from one language to another," but "to move from one place or condition to another," or "to change across." Examining the speaker's attitude and the symbolic movement not only in the hen's existence but also in Janet's, the discussion shifts to a more thematic look at the title of the poem, "Janet Waking," and the focus on the word *waking*. Now the poem becomes not a poem about a young girl who has just lost her pet hen, but one of a young girl who has awakened to the meaning of death. Returning to stanza one, students explore the phrase "deeply morning" in line 2, with a more significant meaning, a poem about a child mourning her loss and awakening to the realities of death, sacrifice, and loss of childhood innocence.

Using this same method to make connections between poetry analysis and their selected song, students begin their analysis of the song lyrics to determine how the music affects their feelings about their song. Students spend one class period developing this annotated analysis of their lyrics. Listening to their song at least three times and focusing on the movement of music, they identify three powerful moments that affected them the most. Using the lyrics and their notes, students discuss whether the effects that moved them in their song are still evident in the words

alone or whether they exist mostly in the music. Did the effects result in a combination of words and music that is not adequately reflected in only the lyrics? Through this study of music and song, students have made life connections about themselves and their generation's cultural expressions by giving them a voice for their thoughts and emotions and imagination.

Poetry and Art

Using music to connect with poetry is just one way that we experience the movement of poetry. Art also makes that connection between words and the movement of the soul. Like poetry, the visual arts, music, and dance all utilize symbols, a form of literacy that develops abilities needed for reading and writing. This integration of art and literature provides greater understanding of figurative language, underlying symbols and themes as well as strengthening abstract and spatial reasoning skills used in reading and writing (Brown et al., 2007). In studying British poetry with seniors, especially those in Advanced Placement classes, this assignment not only asks students to critically analyze difficult works with multiple meanings, but it also challenges them to visually connect to the author's purpose by associating it with a visual piece of art. With poetry, the poet must create all the visual effects through words alone. With art, the artist creates a visual sensory perception of the poet's own beautiful creation. In Jan Greenberg's (2001) book *Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art*, she explains, "What the poet sees in art and puts into words can transform an image ... extending what is often an immediate response for something more lasting and reflective" (p. 4). In this assignment, students experience ways to interpret a poem through an extension of the artist's vision of the poet's words.

Using John Keats's literary ballad "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," students explore the encounter between an unnamed knight and a mysteriously beautiful faery, an ethereally beautiful woman who captivates him to the point that he is left wandering aimlessly, the captive of her snare. Students begin by reading and annotating the text. Working in collaborative groups, they participate in a round-table discussion of the analysis of this poem as a work of art and how the works of such Pre-Raphaelite artists as Frank Dicksee (1902) and Frank Cadogan Cowper (1926) explore ways that create a visual picture that imitates life in their paintings of the same name. Students recognize that this literary ballad retains its melancholy tone of mystery in the artists' works because the meaning of the encounter between the knight and faery lady is never clearly identified. While Dicksee has chosen to represent the scene in the ballad where the knight explains that he "set her on [his] pacing steed, / And nothing else saw all day long, / For sidelong would she bend, and sing / A faery's song," (Keats, IV: 1-4), Cowper prefers to portray the lady as a seductress draped in a flowing red gown and the knight as clearly a victim of her charms. I pose the question "Who is this beautiful woman without pity and why has she done this to the man?" Then I ask students to explore the vision of Romantic poetry and these two artists. In Dicksee's work, the artist creates a sense of feminine hierarchal power as the

How does the imagery in a poem usually contribute to its mood—the feeling or atmosphere the writer creates? Students must establish their argument based on which genre(s) affected them the most: the poem, music, or film. From this study students demonstrate their understanding that poetry is not just a series of words that a writer puts down on paper, but something more significant.

lady holds the knight powerless with her enchanting stare, while Cowper chooses to portray the lady as a seductress and the knight is clearly that victim of her charms. In Dicksee's work, we see this sense of feminine power as the lady holds the knight powerless with her enchanting stare. There is also a sense of hierarchal power as the woman, sitting astride the knight's horse, towers high above the weakened knight, who appears paralyzed by her beguiling stare. Dicksee illustrates not only a moment of powerful beauty and ecstasy but also a threat to the knight's heroics as the power role begins to shift. Cowper's visual work portrays the lady like a red rose clad in bright crimson, a color that signifies passion and intensity, while simultaneously suggesting ideas associated with blood and danger. Juxtaposed is the reclining knight. Here, Cowper gives a more direct view of the results of the knight's love affair than does Dicksee's work, yet it also poses the question: Is he dreaming, drugged by the passion of this enchantress, or is he lifeless, doomed to being a spirit traveling the countryside to warn future wanderers of this lady's cold, insensitive charms? Throughout this lesson students experience how the power of the poet's words and the artist's brush create an understanding of visual imagery and how lyrical and visual movement of the poem and the art are "a depiction of truth to nature, the nature of man's instinct and the power of woman, a 'beautiful lady without pity'" (Arp, 1998, p. 342).

In order for students to make the connection between the study of traditional literature and more contemporary works, I ask students to select as a summative assessment a more contemporary poem that has a significant impact on them. Today's research recommends that "literacy development should be embedded in activities that reflect students' identities, cultures, and social relationships" (Brown et al., 2009, p. 53). As Dr. David Bloome, Professor of Language, Literacy, and Culture at Ohio State University's College of Education, asserts, this can be achieved through "the use of not only fine art but also the art found in popular culture and students' everyday lives" (Brown et al., 2009, p. 53). Using their contemporary poem, students annotate their poem,

looking especially at the diction, tone, shifts in tone, figurative language, imagery, symbolism, and theme. Next, they research online for one work of art, either traditional or contemporary, which expresses the essence of their poem. The work of art does not necessarily need to be an artistic interpretation of the poem, as is the case with Keats's poem, but it should connect to the theme or essence of the poem. In a typed essay, students discuss how the imagery, figurative language, and tone in both the poem and the work of art express the essence of theme. They also develop a presentation on this relationship by explaining how both the poet and the artist convey the emotional and lyrical movement of their message. This unit on the relationship of art and poetry allows students to channel the visual imagery in the language of the poet through the visual interpretation of the artist by analyzing the artistic melodies of each work.

Poetry in Movement

To bring the study of the arts and literature full circle, I always return to my first artistic passion, the poetic movement in dance. Using T. S. Eliot's "The Naming of Cats" from *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (Applebee et al., 2000), students make the connection between the poem and musical theater with Andrew Lloyd Weber's movie version of the Broadway musical *Cats* (Webber & Mallet, 2000), which is based on Eliot's poem. Modern poetry sometimes can be difficult for students, and Eliot's poetry can be some of the most difficult for students to analyze. Trying to understand the urban wasteland and Eliot's existentialist despair in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" can be challenging, but "The Naming of Cats" provides a whimsical, witty antithesis to the poet's style. I begin this study by reading the poem aloud to the class, intentionally emphasizing the rhythm of the poem and Eliot's informal style, use of contractions, and nonsensical names, especially the names of the cats in lines 18 and 19, like "Munkustrap, Quaxo, or Coricopat ... Jellylorum." We discuss tone and how the poet's words enhance or detract from the intent of the work and how music might affect the tone. I ask them to study the tone of the poem and the various personalities of the cats, including the cat described in line 25 in "profound meditation ... / Of the thought ..." At this point, we listen to this section of the poem on the soundtrack of Broadway musical *Cats* and describe ways that the music contributes to or distracts from the poem. Students work off of prior knowledge of how music affects the poet's intent and how the music contributes to the meaning of the poem. The comments of most students reflect the mystical sounds and the quiet, hypnotizing, almost monotone rhythm of dialogue. Delving further into the study of visual, rhythmical movement, they follow this activity by studying the opening scene from the movie version of the production of *Cats*. I ask them not only to listen to the music but to also pay close attention to the characters' movement and idiosyncrasies, such as the rubbing of a paw to the nose, stretching, and slight, quick, staccato movements. How do the characters' movements help them to become believable cats? How does movement affect the music and the poet's intent? Students' interpretations vary on the connections with the poet's vision through words, the musician's interpretation of this vision, and the choreographer/dancer's interpretation of the character,

but their discussion of tone shifts from an auditory-sensory perception to a visual-kinesthetic experience in the contrast of mood and the mock serious tone of Eliot's claim in line 4 that cats need three names.

As a summative assessment of this unit on poetry in movement as a literary, auditory, and visual study, students write an essay analyzing how the imagery found in music and movement affects the overall mood, rhythm, and language of T.S. Eliot's poem "The Naming of Cats." How does the imagery in a poem usually contribute to its mood—the feeling or atmosphere the writer creates? Students must establish their argument based on which genre(s) affected them the most: the poem, music, or film. From this study students demonstrate their understanding that poetry is not just a series of words that a writer puts down on paper, but something more significant. In the words of T. S. Eliot from "Burnt Norton," in *Four Quartets*: "At the still point, there the dance is" (II: 17).

Conclusion

Reflecting over the last 50 years in literacy education, research continues to show that the connection between literature and art and music and dance plays an important role in teaching literacy. Incorporating the arts into the study of literature can help students understand what it means to be human, to learn important lessons and values, and to explore and make connections through different contexts of the arts. I will always remember the last group of students that I taught before leaving the classroom because they helped me to define what teaching is all about. Following an assignment that my AP English Literature class had struggled to complete because I had asked them to work outside of their comfort zone, and after they had turned in their essays and breathed that proverbial sigh that means "I'm glad *that* is done," I asked them what they had learned from this experience. One young man summarized it this way: "Man, that was tough, but I am glad that I did it. You know, Mrs. Z., your class is hard, but you have so much passion about it that you make us like it and you make it fun." Another student in the back of the room chimed in: "Yeah, you made us *really* listen to the sound of our soul with this one!" And a third mumbled: "I think we found that passion." There was a slight nanosecond of silence in the room; then the entire class erupted in laughter, and I realized that I had just witnessed my passion, my goal, come full circle.

Today's educators have a responsibility of insisting on the importance of literacy. We must encourage students to find their passion in life, and incorporating the arts in our classrooms through music, art, dance—through words—is one avenue that strengthens literacy in making this generation's students true learners for life. It is that bridge that connects the past to the present. Teaching and learning in the 21st century must continue to explore ways to bridge the past with the present. Today's teachers must find creative strategies of delivering content and skills in a way that is genuine and relevant. Literature through the arts teaches us humanity, sympathy, and empathy. It gives us a voice for our thoughts and emotions and imagination. And it

teaches us language and the power of communication, a skill that we need in this 21st century society. We must guide our students to find their passion, to pursue their dreams, to put their hand over their heart and listen to the sound of their soul (Straus, 2007). What better way than through music, art, and dance. Breathe. Listen. Move. As Carl Sandburg put it, poetry is "an echo, asking a shadow to dance."

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