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ABSTRACT

The teaching activities presented in this paper focus on four literature assignments. The first explores the concept of love throughout two short stories, John Collier's "The Chaser" and Max Shulman's "Love Is a Fallacy." It contains a "true love opinionaire," a discussion of irony in the stories, and a follow-up evaluation. The second assignment deals with teaching the elegy through a comparison of W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" with Percy Bysshe Shelly's "Adonais" or John Milton's "Lycidas." Auden's poem provides a natural introduction to many aspects of modern poetry, to the elegy in its various forms, and to the nature of poetry and the poet's place in society. The third assignment directs students to compare Simon and Garfunkel's song "Patterns" with Amy Lowell's poem "Patterns," and Simon and Garfunkel's song "I am a Rock" with John Donne's prose passage from "Meditation 17." It discusses comparing themes, reviewing poetic elements, hearing the musical elements of poetry, and comparing forms. In the fourth assignment, the teacher plays a tape of the poem "The Hollow Men," by T.S. Eliot, asking students to imagine making a video of the poem. After students have described their images of the poem in writing, they begin to understand the poem and to gain confidence in themselves as readers. (EL)

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Literature Assignment of the Month

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209 426

Literature Assignment of the Month

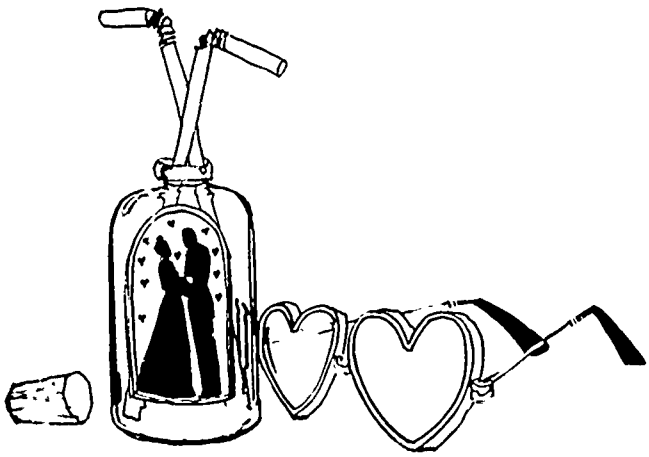
The Nature of Love: Two Short Stories

. . . Young men's love then lies
Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes.

—William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Probably no topic fascinates teenagers quite as much as the relationships between the sexes—not sports or automobiles or rock groups. Yet their information about pop stars, athletes, and cars far exceeds their understanding of love. It's not surprising, therefore, that young adults are drawn to literature that explores the concept of love. John Collier's "The Chaser" and Max Shulman's "Love Is a Fallacy" both speak to the romantic notions of youth concerning love and marriage. Both stories document the effects of attempting to change another person to conform to one's own notion of an ideal relationship. In Collier's story, students see the devastating results of a one-sided relationship based on absolute devotion. In Shulman's story, they see how love can sometimes defy logical analysis. Both stories make clear that true love involves more than our own limited and often selfish desires and interests.

But there are other reasons for selecting these stories. They allow students to discover truths about their own views of love and to gain insight into the views of others. These two stories can also serve as an introduction to more complex works of literature that deal with the nature of love. Finally, both stories provide an opportunity to examine closely a key element of fiction—irony.



The Opinionnaire: How Students View Love

I begin with an activity that relies on a simple idea: students have opinions about love. Before I assign the stories, therefore, I ask students to react to the statements reproduced below.

True Love Opinionnaire

Directions: Read each of the following statements. Write *A* if you agree with a statement or *D* if you disagree with a statement.

1. If you really care for someone, there is nothing wrong with doing whatever you have to do, even lying, to get that person to love you.
2. If you are really in love, the longer you and your partner are together, the stronger your love grows.
3. True lovers should never flirt with other people of the opposite sex.
4. It is never right to scheme just to get someone you like to go out with you.
5. True lovers should spend as much time together as possible.
6. If you are really in love, physical appearance does not matter.
7. It is never right to go out with someone just because he or she is popular or attractive.
8. Physical attraction must come before true love.
9. True lovers should have different opinions and interests.
10. True love means sometimes doing things your partner wants to do even when you don't want to, like going on a picnic when you'd rather see a good movie.

After the class has completed the opinionnaire, I lead a discussion that focuses on their responses to each statement. I encourage students to clarify their answers and to debate their differences. I also provide synthesis and direction. Because the statements require students to take a stand, a lively discussion ensues.

The purpose of the opinionnaire and the follow-up discussion, of course, is to create interest in the characters and issues in the stories students are about to read. Items 5 and 9, for example, relate to one aspect of the problem faced by Alan, the main character in "The Chaser." Alan finds the effects of the love potion appealing because the woman he desires will then want nothing but solitude and him. Responses to these items suggest that many students also think such a relationship is what they want. The old man in Collier's story, however, suggests that this situation will become intolerable. Through class discussion of the opinionnaire, students begin to question some of their initial responses and are consequently prepared to analyze this theme in the stories they are about to read.

After students have read both stories, I divide the class into small, mixed groups and ask them to determine from evidence in the stories how Alan and Petey would define love. How does the narrator of "Fallacy" view love? I ask each group to present to the class its definitions along with supporting evidence from the stories. To help the groups get started, I ask how Polly would define love. Most students quickly see that her view is based on appearances. As evidence, they point to the last line of the story: "He's got a raccoon coat." Later, the class reassembles to discuss its findings.

What Irony Reveals

After students understand what love means to the characters in the two stories, they are prepared to deal with irony—the implicit view of love behind the explicit one. What are the authors really telling us about love?

I ask students to return to their small groups and to attempt to explain why the views of love held by Alan and the narrator of "Fallacy" will prove inadequate. What are Collier and Shulman trying to tell us about the nature of love? In working out answers to these questions, students begin to understand that it is irony

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that provides the link between each character's limited view of love and the more mature view offered by the authors.

Again, the class reassembles to discuss and debate its findings. Gradually, students begin to formulate important conclusions. They realize, for example, that Collier is criticizing more than Alan's romanticized notion that Diane should be jealous of other women. They perceive that Collier is really telling us that love involves considering the needs of people to be free. They recognize that if Alan's ideal were realized, it would result in an unbearable chaining of one individual to another.

Following this discussion, I ask students to refer back to the opinionnaire and to compare their responses with their observations about the stories. Often opinions have changed. It is not surprising to hear a student say, "I guess it isn't always a good idea to spend all of your time with the person you love."

Follow-up Evaluation

To learn how well students have understood the ironic technique, I ask them to read on their own another story that involves the concept of love and that relies on irony to convey its meaning. Then I ask them to write an interpretation of that story. A good story to use is O. Henry's "The Exact Science of Matrimony." This follow-up reinforces skills students have developed in reading and analyzing "The Chaser" and "Love Is a Fallacy"; it also serves as an evaluation of their mastery of those skills.

Larry R. Johannessen, Lyons Township High School, La Grange, Illinois

Volume 2 Number 1 September 1984

Literature Assignment of the Month

The Elegy: A Comparative Approach for Students of High Ability

Able students may find W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" a highly rewarding poem in itself, richly varied in structure, tone, and ideas. Capable students, however, profit even more from studying this poem in combination with Shelley's "Adonais" or Milton's "Lycidas," both elegies in the pastoral tradition. Through such a comparative approach, Auden's poem provides a natural introduction to many aspects of modern poetry, to the elegy in its various forms, and to stimulating considerations about the nature of poetry and the poet's place in society.

Assign the two poems for independent reading and for group analysis, with students working in groups of four or five. The groups are first to explicate each poem and then to list basic differences in the ways the poets handle their subject. Absolutely no discussion of conventions of the pastoral elegy should precede this independent investigation, though you should be available to help clarify troublesome passages and allusions, to play recordings of each poem, and to raise questions that stimulate more penetrating analysis. Given the length and complexity of these poems, students will probably need two class periods to complete their lists.

After sharing their independent observations of the Auden poem and "Adonais," alert students were quick to offer such comments as these:

> Auden's poem seems almost deliberately cold and objective, while Shelley makes the reader feel the world has come to an end because the poet has died.

Shelley digresses, but Auden sticks closely to his subject all the way through.

Auden actually brings out some of Yeats's personal faults. Shelley makes his subject seem almost too good for this world.

The language in these poems is certainly different! Auden's poem sounds like a conversation except for the last section, while Shelley's is much more formal and eloquent.

Auden seems most concerned about the immortality of Yeats's poetry, Shelley about the immortality of the man.

At no time, of course, should comparison of the two poems contribute to setting up one as superior to the other. What should become evident is that each poet wrote in different times and circumstances, for different purposes and effects.

Through such interchange and reexamination of specific passages in the two poems, the class should inductively arrive at an awareness of the traditional conventions of the pastoral elegy used by Shelley. Then, with a shock of discovery, they should return to Auden's poem to perceive that he has deliberately refuted these pastoral conventions. By writing an "anti-elegy," he has demonstrated what he believes a true elegy should be. In section one, for example, students should notice how Auden has undercut the impact of personal grief by showing the "cold" indifference of man and nature to the physical death of a human being—albeit a famous one. In section two they should note that he mentions the deficiencies of the dead man and thereby makes him more convincingly human. Honoring a man in spite of his faults is surely a higher tribute than the hyperbolic praise that the pastoral elegy conventionally employs. In section three, a tightly rhymed litany in the rhythm of "Jack and Jill," students should perceive Auden's central theme that while "poetry makes nothing happen," great poetry can make people of a given society more sensitive, thoughtful, and aware, and perhaps more capable of preventing war and social oppression such as that which threatened Europe in 1939, the year of Yeats's death.

At this stage of discussion you might suggest that Auden's poem exhibits a number of characteristics that mark it as a "modern" poem, significantly different from works by Victorian or Romantic poets. Like other poems in the modern tradition, it undercuts emotion through the use of understatement and specific, actually technical, language. It also uses such blunt language and imagery as "guts of the living" and the metaphor of political insurrection for a man's death. Further, as is characteristic of twentieth-century poetry, it exhibits several shifts in tone and point of view, corresponding to shifts in idea, rather than maintaining a uniform tone and pattern. Above all, Auden has refused to pretend to a per-

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sonal grief he does not feel or, as Shakespeare would say, have his tribute "belied with false compare."

Other modern elegies and "anti-elegies" could be profitably read and compared: Peter Viereck's "Poet" (which closely parallels Auden's approach), Theodore Roethke's "Elegy for Jane," Richard Wilbur's "To An American Poet Just Dead," and Dylan Thomas's "A Refusal to Mourn the Death of a Child by Fire." A broader survey of the elegy might include Ben Jonson's "On My First Son," William Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems, Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Elegy," and, if it has not been handled before, Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed."

Growing naturally from a study of Auden's poem could also come considerations about the nature of poetry and the poet's place in society. Auden has made claims for poetry, yet he placed limitations on what it can do, establishing a point of view that leads to a number of other poems defining or commenting on poetry: Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica," Marianne Moore's "Poetry," Dylan Thomas's "In My Craft and Sullen Art," Wallace Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry," and Carl Sandburg's "Ten Definitions of Poetry." All of these investigations, however, should ultimately lead back to Auden's poem, enforcing his assertion that, while individuals die and worlds crumble, the written word survives.

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Volume 2 Number 2 November 1984

Literature Assignment of the Month

Patterns and Islands: Songs into Poetry

This activity, an oldie but goodie, moves from that which is familiar to the students (songs) to that which is less familiar (poetry). I play two of Simon and Garfunkel's songs, "Patterns" and "I Am a Rock." Students then compare the first song to Amy Lowell's poem "Patterns" and the second song to John Donne's famous prose passage from "Meditation 17." (Both of these selections are easy to locate.)

"Patterns" by Paul Simon

The night set softly with the hush of falling leaves,
Casting shivering shadows on the houses through the trees.
And the light from the streetlamp makes a pattern on my wall
Like the pieces of a puzzle or a child's uneven scrawl.

Up a narrow flight of stairs in a narrow little room,
As I lie upon my bed in the early evening gloom,
Impaled on the wall (My eyes can dimly see)
The pattern of my life and the puzzle that is me.

From the moment of my birth to the instant of my death
There are patterns I must follow just as I must breathe each breath.
Like a rat in a maze, the path before me lies,
And the pattern never alters . . . until the rat dies.

The pattern still remains on the wall where darkness fell,
And it's fitting that it should for in darkness I must dwell.
Like the color of my skin or the day that I grow old,
My life is made of patterns that can scarcely be controlled.

("Patterns" Copyright © 1964 Paul Simon)

Amy Lowell's eighteenth-century "Patterns" is a narrative poem, the story of love unfulfilled because of death. The narrator is walking in a formal garden and wishing for her lover, the man she was to have married in a month. Not until near the end of the poem do we realize the lover has been killed in the war. The narrator sees patterns everywhere: the garden border, seasonal flowers, her dress (stiff whalebone and brocade), wars, even herself (a rare pattern). The idea of a pattern comes to represent a prison for the narrator.

"I Am a Rock" by Paul Simon

A winter's day in a deep and dark December—
I am alone, gazing from my window
To the streets below
On a freshly fallen silent shroud of snow . . .
I am a rock. I am an island.

I build walls—a fortress steep and mighty,
That none may penetrate.
I have no need of friendship,
Friendship causes pain,
It's laughter and it's loving I disdain.
I am a rock. I am an island.

Don't talk of love. Well, I've heard the word before.
It's sleeping in my memory;
I won't disturb the slumber of feelings that have died,
If I never loved I never would have cried!
I am a rock. I am an island.

("I Am a Rock" Copyright © 1965 Paul Simon)

In John Donne's "Meditation 17," a seventeenth-century prose piece, the narrator (obviously Donne) is recovering from a serious illness. He states in prose that he is joined to all mankind by the tolling of the bell. He is not a chapter alone but is part of a one-authored volume of mankind; not an island, but a piece of a continent, a part of the main.

After the songs have been played and the poem and prose piece read aloud, you may choose to put students into smaller groups to look at the two "patterns" first. Or you may wish to conduct the discussion with the entire class so that students have an example to follow before they look at the two "island" pieces. Students usually enter the discussion voluntarily, especially if the song is discussed first. Comparisons and contrasts are easily found for attitude of the narrator, theme, tone, and setting. I try to include these kinds of considerations:

1. *Compare themes.* The two "pattern" poems have the same protest, and the Donne passage and Simon's "I Am a Rock" have contrasting ideas revolving around the same metaphor: island.

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2. *Review poetic elements.* All four works have vivid figures of speech and outstanding imagery. In the "patterns" pieces, Simon sings of the "child's uneven scrawl" while Lowell writes "letters squirmed like snakes."
3. *Hear the musical elements of poetry.* Students love to listen to songs, and the songs can lead to a discussion of the sound elements of poetry and prose. Read both the Lowell poem and the Donne prose out loud so students experience the rhythm.
4. *Compare forms.* The song "Patterns" is a variation of the ballad, while "I Am a Rock" is a hybrid. "Meditation 17" is prose but very poetic prose, and Lowell's "Patterns" is free verse. I've had good discussions on the differences between prose and poetry. However, these four examples demonstrate to students that the difference between prose and poetry is not so much black and white—but more a continuum.

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Volume 2 Number 3 January 1985

Literature Assignment of the Month

"The Hollow Men": The Video

In this "postliterate" age of disk, tube, and cassette, the prospect of teaching serious literature to young people is at times daunting. Raised on the ritual formulas of TV sitcoms, the apparently mindless lyrics of rock music, and the quick cuts and breakneck pace of much contemporary film, how can adolescents be expected to give to literature the passionate attention we believe it requires, to use their minds to participate fully in the literary experience?

But wait . . . perhaps it's possible that our students are learning something from the electronic media that they can use to their advantage in reading literature—especially modern literature, which is often nonlinear and initially baffling even to experienced readers. I was struck by this possibility while watching a rock video in which the words of the song were paralleled with an apparently unconnected series of images. A connection existed, however, between the associations created by the images, a connection primarily of mood and emotion. Rock lyrics lend themselves to this kind of presentation, since the music is always there to provide continuity. As Ric Ocasek of the Cars stated, "My lyrics are designed to set up images. Or a mood. Or a transformation from one thing to another. A vision. A light painting. . . . A bunch of manipulated contradictions. . . ."

This same process, of course, defines a great deal of modern poetry. Although poetry does not *fix* the images for the reader (fortunately), young viewers of rock video, although they may not realize it, understand the patterning of images quite well. I capitalize on this understanding when I teach modern poetry; for example, a poem such as "The Hollow Men" by T. S. Eliot.

Before I play a tape of the poem read by Eliot to a class of seniors, I tell them that Eliot is commenting on modern life in much the same way as some of their favorite lyricists do. I ask them to concentrate on the words of the poem as it is read and to imagine that they will be making a video of the poem. They will choose images for the screen that communicate the essential atmosphere and emotion of the poem. Immediately after hearing the tape, each student is to write for fifteen minutes describing as much of his or her video as possible given the time constraints. Students are to restrict their descriptions to what the viewer will *see*.

Some of my students' screen images were predictable: "straw dummies leaning together on the floor of a dark cellar. Some of the stuffing has come out. . . ." But even those students who used images taken directly from the poem showed a strong sense of the visual: "a large desert sprinkled liberally with cactus. Way off in the distance is a long dark line. . . . As the line and the camera get closer we see that the line consists of human shaped figures. They are dark with long hair and their lips are moving." Or: "stuffed dummies whispering . . . to each other in a vast field. Then . . . flashes to rats in the cellar. Next, you are in the fire of the underworld. It is like ancient Greece and there are people without eyes. . . . A dark desert with a hand with bugs crawling on it in the sand." Many students went further and created their own images: "men stepping out of a subway after what appears to be a post-holocaust situation." Or: "Break to an ordinary man lying awake in bed, dreaming of hell. . . ."

After students have written for fifteen minutes, I list as many of their images as possible on the board. We discuss various ways of categorizing the images, beginning with "positive" and "negative." It doesn't take long for the students to see patterns of death and life, despair and hope, sterility and fertility in their representations. At this point I tell them that they have understood the poem on one essential level, and now they should go back to the text and see how the poet has structured the emotions and ideas. As we work together with the text, they come to realize that Eliot is working within a context that the images only suggest. By responding to the vision, students find a way into the poem. They realize that poetry isn't all that different from other aspects of their experience, and they gain confidence in themselves as readers.

Suzanne Howell, Carbondale, Illinois

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