

“Literary Texts-in-Motion: Classroom
Approaches to Performance”

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Abstract

Classroom exercises and role-playing activities that culminate in performance are invaluable instructional tools that stimulate active student responses to the aesthetic, emotional or intellectual content of literary texts and, ultimately, enrich a student’s learning experience. The exercises and role-playing activities suggested for creative exploration are designed to promote imaginative interpretation and visualization of literary characters as well as inventive classroom staging strategies.

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Creative exercises and role-playing activities that culminate in classroom performance are invaluable instructional tools available to teachers who wish to actively engage beginning students in the analysis and interpretation of literary texts. The basic principles of classroom performance emphasize an imaginative instructional perspective that stimulates student responses to the aesthetic, emotional and intellectual exploration of literary texts. Classroom performance, of course, is much more complex than randomly selecting students and asking them to read aloud selected passages from a literary text. It is, in its most simple objective, the intuitive ability of students to transform a literary text into a living, breathing presence that speaks to the universal theme of the individual author.

Literary characters rarely leap full-blown from the printed page to identify their role-playing potential for classroom performance. They emerge in infinitely more subtle and frequently disguised creative exercises and activities that point the way to the theatrical impulse students need to sketch memorable vocal and physical character portraits. Frequent repetition of creative exercises and activities designed for students to see, hear and feel the emotions and thoughts of literary characters also promotes a sense of familiarity and understanding for students when a literary text is initially analyzed and then enacted in a classroom performance.

The role of the voice and the body in classroom approaches to performance of literary texts is crucial in promoting active student engagement in character analysis and interpre-

tation. In the first part of the exercise, the objective is for students to voice the following excerpt from T. S. Eliot's The Hollow Men using only gestures and movement to help

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visualize the poem's meaning. Begin the exercise by dividing the class into small groups of three students each. Students are then instructed to analyze the excerpt that follows to identify the poem's setting, poetic images that lend themselves to gestures and movement and to determine an appropriate age for the literary character being described.

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw.
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together,
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry glass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar.

Next, one student from each of the assigned groups moves to the front of the classroom and performs the poem silently using only the subtle gestures and movements identified by their group analysis to convey the action being described by the poet. Gestures and movements in this part of the exercise should be both fluid and flexible,

executed with strength and vigor. At the end of each student's silent performance there should be active class discussion related to the performance choices made, the clarity of

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gestures and the evocative images suggested by the movement.

In part two of the exercise, students in each group turn their attention to "voicing" the excerpt using the familiar vocal terms pitch, rate, and volume to give additional depth and dimension to the subtle gestures and movements that were explored in part one of the exercise. Here, a different student from each of the assigned groups moves to the front of the classroom and voices the poem with specific emphasis on individual words or poetic images that are compatible with the gestures and movements identified in part one of the exercise. The role of the voice in this part of the exercise should demonstrate vitality and flexibility in interesting variations in pitch, rate and volume that are expressive and meaningful to a vocal interpretation of the poem.

At the end of the vocal performance segment of the exercise, there should be active class discussion related to the musical role of the voice in giving life and meaning to literary images and in creating an aural as well as visual portrait of a literary character. The exercise then concludes when a third student from each of the assigned groups moves to the front of the classroom and presents a final literary character portrait for each group using both subtle gestures, movements and vocal qualities that have emerged and subsequently been refined in the classroom discussion and performance in parts one and two of the exercise.

The exercise may also be extended as a small group project with an eight to ten minute excerpt from a single literary text or a series of short poems staged in playing

spaces suggested in the selected literature. The extended exercise is an opportunity for students to refine their vocal interpretation and movement skills and to explore the role of

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minimal costumes, hand pops and environmental staging spaces in visualizing literary texts. Literature useful for the extended exercise might include an abbreviated adaptation of George Orwell's Animal Farm, excerpts from T.S. Eliot's Possum Book tales—which was the source for the long-running Broadway musical Cats—Robert Benchley's comic snapshots of “Family Life in America,” the Pyramus and Thisby “comic mechanicals” scene in A Midsummer Night's Dream or the collective narrative poems from Anne Sexton's “Transformations.”

