

“Teach Me How to Work and Keep Me Kind”

A Meditation on Literature in High School

BY JOSEPH F. RIENER

For 17 years, I taught AP English at a large public high school in Washington, D.C. Many students saw my job as helping them acquire the knowledge and skills to succeed in college. I viewed it as an opportunity to prepare young people for adulthood by offering them a memorable encounter with literature.

With poems, short stories, novels, and plays, I exposed students to a variety of ideas, issues, and feelings. I wanted them to ponder the complexity of human emotion and what constitutes a good life. The work my students undertook in my classroom, the important conversations they had with me and with each other, illustrates the possibilities and benefits of a liberal arts education.

Each year, I began my class for juniors with a poem by Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man.” Because it combines a seemingly accessible dialogue without an initially clear sense of meaning, I could demonstrate the value of literary analysis as a way to derive a deeper understanding of the poem.

I would ask three students to read the poem aloud; each assumed a different character’s voice: that of the farmer, Warren; his wife, Mary; and the narrator. That way, students experienced something like a short play, where all the action occurs in the dialogue.

In the poem’s fifth line, Mary announces, “Silas is back.” Warren responds, “I’ll not have the fellow back.” The dynamic of the conversation establishes itself: Mary is sympathetic to this broken-down farm worker. Warren, the employer left in the lurch “in having time, when any help is scarce,” is angry at him.

Yet Mary persists. She wants Warren to open his heart to this

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old man. Recalling the summer that Silas worked with a college student, Mary has Warren imagine the comedic conversations of these two workers, the young one full of education, his elder convinced of its uselessness. We see Warren move from anger to appreciation as he recalls Silas’s ability to work efficiently in bailing hay. Mary then offers why Silas moves her: “He’s come home to die.” But Warren balks at her use of “home.” This isn’t Silas’s home, he implies, because “home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.”

Mary counters, “I should have called it something you somehow haven’t to deserve,” thereby subverting Warren’s definition of a home based on obligation. She instead offers an idea of home

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as a place beyond deserving and founded on generosity. The extent of her ability to shift Warren's view of Silas becomes clear as he reflects, "I can't think Si ever hurt anyone." The poem concludes with Warren going to check on Silas and finding that the old man has died.

Now, what can this poem offer a high school class? It illustrates how emotions change and how anger doesn't always prevail. I used this poem to illustrate the Tao statement, "The softest of all things shall overcome the hardest of all things." Without fighting her husband directly, Mary succeeds in encouraging Warren to view Silas with more compassion. The old man emerges as far more than an irresponsible employee. Mary invites Warren to see him as someone "so concerned for other folk, and nothing to look backward to with pride, and nothing to look forward to with hope."

Through the poem, students witness the subtle art of persuasion. While Silas might be deemed homeless in our current nomenclature, Warren views him differently by the poem's end. This shift suggests the possibilities of personal transformation. In literature, as in life, compassion and understanding can replace anger and contempt.

It takes much discussion for students to grasp the poem. During this process, I saw myself as a tour guide. I accompanied young people as they took in the literature for the first time. I would offer them a way of understanding what they were reading. I would supply an idea to those who didn't yet possess the analytical tools, the frame of reference, or even the language of feeling necessary to articulate what they experienced as they heard the poem.

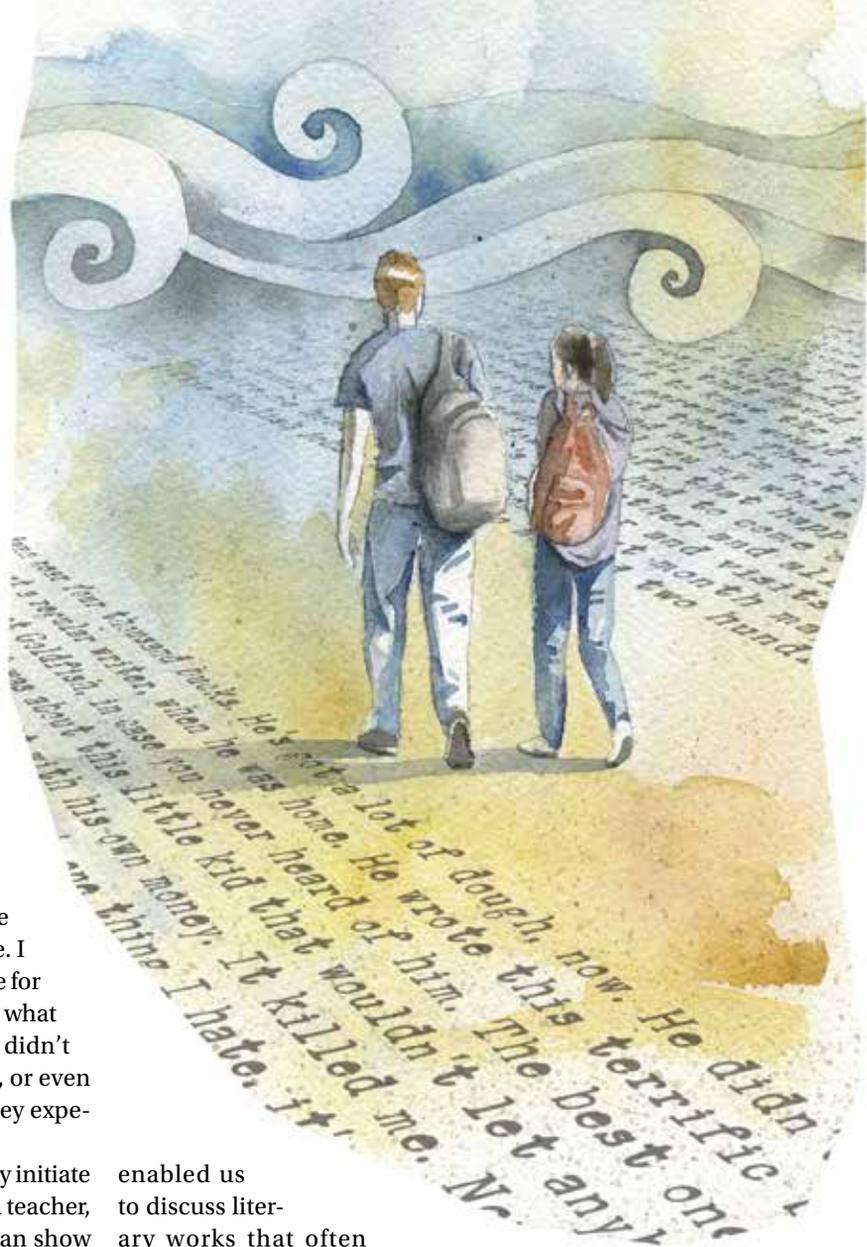
I saw my task as making connections that could slowly initiate a new method of seeing, a deeper way of reading. Only a teacher, an adult with a much larger vocabulary of emotion, can show students how an impression or a sensation may translate into an understanding of human experience.

Ultimately, I believe literature only means something if it prompts us to talk about ourselves. So I would always share a personal story. I would tell them that some time ago, on my second date with a young woman, I offered that she reminded me of Mary from "The Death of the Hired Man." She went home that night and read the poem. Now we have three children and three grandchildren. "You want enduring romance in your life?" I would ask my class. "Poetry! That's the way."

Though my wife and I lost track of the poem as our lives went on, when it came time to name our third child, I suggested "Silas." The name had always appealed to me. Only years later did I pick up the poem again to realize that's where I had first heard the name. Among the many lessons from Frost's poem that I would offer to my students is this: you never can tell how a work of literature might weave its way through your life, even without your conscious awareness.

Ushering Young People into an Uncertain World

As each school year progressed, my students and I would develop a greater sense of trust and connection. The stronger relationship



enabled us to discuss literary works that often evoke tender, even painful feelings.

For instance, "Father and Son," a poem by Stanley Kunitz, addresses his yearning for his father, who took his own life before Kunitz was born. In this poem, the poet offers a dream-like image of chasing after his absent father to bring him back to life and to a relationship with his son. Kunitz then asks his father to "teach me how to work and keep me kind."

We often believe young people wish to strike out on their own. But from the discussions my students and I had about this poem and the essays they wrote afterward, I know the poem evokes their own longing for adults in their lives who engage with them about how to relate to a terribly fraught world. They wish for someone to guide them as they struggle to make sense of the difficulties and confusions inherent in adult life.

Young people need our help in figuring out what work is worth their energy and devotion, and how whatever talents and inclinations they possess will connect with a lifetime of useful labor. As they become aware of cruelty and injustice in the world, they wonder how to respond to it without becoming mean or cynical. Kunitz's poem allows for a consideration of such questions within a high school classroom.

A liberal arts education can teach young people the habits of mind to enable them to thoughtfully consider how they want to spend their lives. It can also establish the connection between one's self and others, what we call empathy. With insight and understanding, the liberal arts can teach students that education is a matter of the head and the heart, of work and kindness. Literature aids the journey to compassion.

As an English teacher, I understand I am escorting young people out of their childhoods. What better novel to represent the power of grief in a human being's life than J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*?

Few students know what to make of the novel's protagonist, Holden Caulfield, at first. Most see him as just a spoiled jerk. To help them understand Caulfield, I would ask my students if Holden was smart. Most would agree he displays some reflective sense about the world. Issues of right or wrong, truth or phoniness, weigh on his mind, even if in a skewed fashion. Ultimately, he comes across as a thoughtful, somewhat self-aware young person.

So, I would ask my students why he was unable to make his way through high school. They would offer that he was mentally ill, depressed, or "didn't care." Attempting to broaden their perspective, I would suggest he wasn't ill or depressed. What happened to him was human, not pathological.

Consider the context in which Holden finds himself: a prep school where someone has stolen his coat. Upon being kicked out of the school, he seeks out the one teacher he seemed to feel some affection toward so he can say a proper goodbye. Yet this man ends up humiliating Holden by reading from his failed test. The other boys seem predatory or self-absorbed themselves. We learn later that, at another former prep school Holden had attended, a student had been so bullied that the boy ended up killing himself. Although it's an unsympathetic environment for any young person, the other boys do seem able to manage the demands of a high school curriculum. Holden, on the other hand, flunks out. What's going on? Why can't he cope with life? What weighs on his mind that might be unusual compared with his fellow students? Have certain life experiences set him apart?

As I asked these questions, at some point a student, often one who has painfully gained a sense of these emotions, would offer the death of Holden's brother Allie as a significant event in Holden's life. We then would begin to highlight the times he discusses Allie: from the novel's beginning, with his story of Allie's baseball mitt covered with poems by Emily Dickinson, to his talk with his younger sister, Phoebe. She asks him to "name one thing" he likes, and Holden replies, "I like Allie." Then at the end of the novel, as Holden feels he's falling apart, he prays to Allie for help crossing the street without disappearing.

I would suggest to students that Holden shows us the power of grief in a person's life. In his prep school world, no one seems to know or care about the burden he carries.

Through the novel, my students learned how losing a child becomes a crisis for both siblings and parents. The death of someone so young upsets the world's sense of balance. It can easily

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destroy a belief in a benevolent God or a promising future. Holden's entire family feels plagued with the guilt of survivors. Holden loved his brother. The loss destroys his normal teenage life. At the end of the story, he's writing to us from a mental hospital, where the doctors have given him a good prognosis.

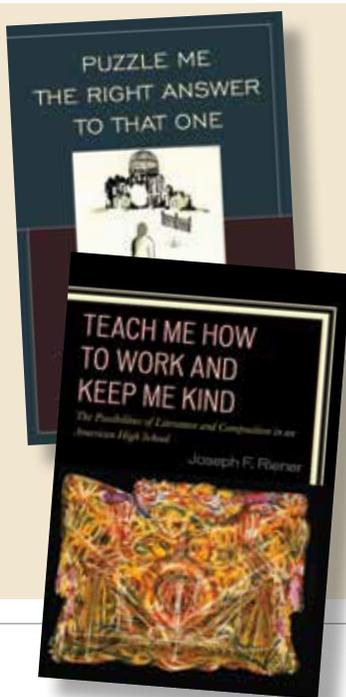
The journey into pain, perhaps as they reflect on their own losses, upsets many students. Yet literature exists partly to usher the young into an uncertain world. And this particular novel enables young people to connect to a person their age struggling with grief.

I challenged my students by asserting that Holden falling apart is a good thing. His reaction to Allie's death indicates his genuine feelings for his brother, and it demonstrates why loving someone is an act of courage. It means taking the risk that agony awaits if the love ends.

This novel also allowed me to connect the artist with a specific moment in history. Salinger, seemingly deliberately, allows almost no historical markers in the novel. He seems to wish us to consider the time as merely "the modern present." Only the publication date, 1951, indicates its moment in history. If there were a collective emotion the world experienced at that time, it was grief. Many people had died suddenly, horribly, in the previous few years. Loss of loved ones then would have been central to human consciousness. That may or may not have been in Salinger's conscious awareness as he wrote how grief pervaded the life of one young man. But as readers, we can understand that emotion in the immediate postwar world.

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Young Readers

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can start to jump over the polarizing debates and put energy into helping young students become literate across media of all kinds.

The American Academy of Pediatrics hit this nail on the head when it published its preview in October about why it was rethinking its screen time guidelines. “In a world where ‘screen time’ is becoming simply ‘time,’” the article said, “our policies must evolve or become obsolete.”¹² The lines that used to define “screen time,” “learning time,” and “play time” have become so blurred as to be meaningless. Now it’s about how well we’re using our time and resources with children. Learning can happen via book or screen, or, in the case of e-books, both. Let’s address how learning can and should be happening regardless of the medium.

The children and families of the 21st century will grow up with screens and digital media everywhere. Educators and parents will need new models for how to use these tools to promote learning. Instead of pushing screens away, let’s put them into the hands of adults and children to use *together* to learn and grow. In using technology to help educate children, the class of 2030 needs all of us to embrace this third way. □

Endnotes

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Literature in High School

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Despite this powerful—and at times painful—journey, I helped my students see the novel’s conclusion as an optimistic one. We have a sense, as the poet Denise Levertov writes, of seeing grief become “a new pearl-grey thread entering the weave” of Holden’s life. He won’t ever stop grieving his loss, but maybe he can use that emotion to benefit others. He wants to be, Holden tells Phoebe, “the catcher in the rye,” someone who saves children from falling off a cliff. To that end, we might imagine Holden as an effective high school guidance counselor, or a psychotherapist treating psychological suffering in young people. Out of terrible grief, the novel suggests, can arise a purpose that endures over a lifetime.

Much of this analysis of the novel would not be available to students from their own reading. It takes a teacher, a knowledgeable guide, to help them understand the universal truths of a literary work. This path to understanding involves question and answer, the teacher talking, the students listening, and then discussing the text together. That’s the nature of any introduction to a topic, from the study of literature to ancient Greek art to Australian football, where one person knows a great deal more about the subject than everyone else in the room.

As a literature teacher, I always sought to demonstrate how these works can evoke students’ deepest thoughts and feelings. They can see they are not alone.

Aside from classroom discussions, my students’ written work showed me how much they were absorbing and reflecting on what we read. On paper, they weren’t inhibited by the theater of the classroom. They could communicate what they thought, without worrying how they would appear to their peers. In their essays, they could be more deliberate, more vulnerable to a new idea, and more willing to allow in some painful insight. I never placed too much emphasis on what students said in class. It was always in writing that students showed me what they were thinking.

And what exactly were they thinking? Perhaps that a man angry at a lousy employee could eventually yield to his wife’s kindness. That yearning for a guide through life is universal. That grief over loss can be expressed. All this, and much more, can find its way into a high school classroom through the consideration of literature. □

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