

## The Flawed Peach and the Broken Family: Three Perspectives on Teaching Confrontational Literature

Simao: My first four years of teaching were in a rural school system in western Maryland. My students mostly came from working-class families, many of them from single-parent homes, and, after a few years, I found myself cynically surprised when a student's last name matched that of the parents. Still, I was too inexperienced and unsure of myself to weave this social issue into real lessons and retreated behind faceless literary interpretation and detached expository writing and ignored the huge white elephant lumbering around the classroom. Early on, it sometimes seemed as if I got so lost in the rhetorical power of the texts that I forgot their emotional impacts.

Conversely, my last five years of teaching have been in a suburban, mostly affluent school system. The demographics are more white-collar, but the split households seem just as prevalent as in my old school. Going through my own divorce five years ago has lent another aspect to my teaching: maybe it's a degree of empathy I never had, maybe a sense of identification, but I now find it difficult to teach stories revolving around families and family dynamics as simply literature. There's too much epiphany, too much inherent catharsis to be confronted and enfolded.

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already started to alter our lives for the better? Remember how our hearts skipped when we first read O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard To Find?" Or the numbness right after we finished Jackson's "The Lottery?" And so, finally, just last year, and with the help of a dynamic student

teacher and an inquisitive class, I think I reclaimed much of that visceral territory of the real so essential in sharing the power of confrontational, provocative literature with students.

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* helped with its complex weaving of intertextuality, its Eden imagery, and its pathos-laden conclusion. I read the last chapter aloud to my ninth graders and half the class was in tears because of Lennie's death and because of how George and Lennie's dreams are ultimately as ashen and barren as the old fire pit in the clearing where George throws the pistol. However, what really helped us reconnect with honest emotion in literature, and

ultimately led to a catharsis for me and my students, was William Saroyan's little gem of a story "Gaston." Here, too, are themes of the Fall, of shattered dreams, of estrangement and disconnect; and here, too, is vivid imagery, concise dialogue, beautifully sparse characterization, and the seductive siren-song of symbolism. But beneath these lies a deceptively simple story of a family separated by divorce, by differing cultural values, by economics, and by oceans. And at the end, Saroyan deftly reveals a truism many of my students are all-too familiar with: once we leave the Garden and once our family is scattered, we can never go back and we end up feeling as exposed and purposeless as Gaston on the white plate.

What's beautiful about this story is how it lends itself to a direct connection. Several other stories we read in class come close to this: Ursula K. Leguin's brilliant allegory "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is a catalyst that forces students to confront their ethical role in society; Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" allows the class to discuss the role of individuals within a society (and as one precocious ninth-grade student wrote, how Tessie Hutchinson stands for every suffering housewife who bears the weight of the family and village so as to allow society to continue on its business). But "Gaston" cuts deeper than the previous stories; it is pure and direct and can make its mark even without a discussion of Saroyan's literary techniques.

### Easing into Confrontation

I take my students through several guided readings of the story. The first time, I read

it aloud and have the students write an informal response journal addressing their emotional reaction. I'm careful not to mention any symbolism, metaphors, or other elements because I want the students to simply react to the story as interlocutors in a textual conversation. At this stage many of my students write somewhat vague responses of how they feel sorry for the father or for the daughter, or how the story makes

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them sad because it seems as if no one was very happy. Several students inevitably write about personal connections to the main characters—how they feel like the father or the daughter or, occasionally, like the bug

itself. These observations are emotional and literary stepping stones to the reasons why a story makes them react the way it does.

I then read the story aloud again, though this time I have students focus on two or three key passages. I allow them time to annotate these passages, and then set them into groups for shared inquiry and analysis. I'm careful not to start lunging at the bit and bolt towards metaphor and symbolism—that will come later—but it's hard sometimes, especially with passages like this one, at the beginning of the story:

They were to eat peaches, as planned, after her nap, and now she sat across from the man who would have been a total stranger except that he was in fact her father. They had been together again (although she couldn't quite remember when they had been together before) for almost a hundred years now, or was it only since day before yesterday? Anyhow, they were

together again, and he was kind of funny...He wore blue slacks, but no shoes and socks. He was barefoot, and so was she, of course.

He was at home. She was with him in his home in Paris, if you could call it a home. He was very old, especially for a young man—thirty-six, he had told her; and she was six, just up from sleep on a very hot afternoon in August. (25)

What English teacher *doesn't* want to start a class discussion on the Eden imagery, on how Saroyan presents us with a couple who are barefoot and seemingly outside time, who are about to eat fruit as the sun starts to set, and how fall is just around the corner?

But I hold back; I want students to attend to the family dynamics, to really dive into the relationship between the father and his daughter. I also might have them focus on this passage in which the girl and her father watch a bug, whom the father has named Gaston, crawl out of a flawed peach and wander around the white plate the peach is on:

“Gaston is out in the world and on his own now. You can see for yourself how comfortable he was in there. He had everything.”

“Now what has he got?”

“Not very much, I'm afraid.”

“What's he going to do?”

“What are we going to do?”

“Well, we're not going to squash him, that's one thing we're not going to do,” the girl said. (27)

Then, after the groups discuss and a few share their findings on the nature of the relationship, on how each character sees the other and what in the text is essential to this conclusion, I have students write another informal response journal, this one combining responses to the relationship, connections to their own family dynamic, and speculation on what in the text foreshadows the inevitable dissolution of the father and daughter's relationship. A few students want to share their responses and these responses are usually more relevant and focused than

the earlier journals. I also use this time to start exploring Saroyan's imagery and metaphor. As always, the students are delighted and awed by what's hidden between the lines and with no further prodding they can usually discover and discuss other metaphors and symbols.

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### Connecting with the Bug on the Plate

Thus far this is all fairly standard Junior Great Books methodology. However, where it gets interesting is when I do a last guided reading of the story, focusing on the final two pages. In this passage the father has gone off to buy more peaches and the little girl is talking with her mother on the telephone. In the ensuing conversation, the daughter undergoes a sudden and perhaps inexorable shift from innocence to experience, realizing that Gaston is only a bug and subject to squashing:

The girl watched Gaston on the plate, and she actually didn't like him. He was all ugh, as he had been in the first place. He didn't have a home anymore

and he was wandering around on the white plate and he was silly and wrong and ridiculous and useless and all sorts of other things. She cried a little, but only inside, because long ago she had decided she didn't like crying because if you ever started to cry it seemed as if there was so much to cry about you almost couldn't stop, and she didn't like that at all. The open halves of the peach seed were wrong, too. They were ugly or something. They weren't clean. (31)

The emotional impact on the students and on me is palpable. I can't help choking up a bit when I read this; my students pick up on the emotion, the sense of loss, and for those whose own households have suffered from divorce, the story finally hits home with all of Saroyan's intended power. Usually without my prompting, students start writing their third set of response journals. We talk about what Gaston might represent, how the divided peach and the divided seed are powerful symbols, and kids pick up on Saroyan's use of the word “flawed” to describe the peach and by extension the family. One or two have even mentioned Saroyan's larger metaphor of the conflict between new, glamorous America and old, stodgy Europe. But it's that evaluative plane of questioning that I want my students to work on, and so I have them write a fourth and last response—this one a polished essay on their connection to and reaction with the text.

How many of our students have ever felt like Gaston, the bug on the plate? How

many who come from divorced households have ever looked at their parents as being just as lost and confused as they are? In as lucid and eloquent a commentary as any of my senior AP students could have produced, ninth-grader Sally (all names are pseudonyms) writes:

When I was six years old, as the daughter in “Gaston” is, I had to choose whether to live with my mother or my father. I felt stuck in between, so small and vulnerable. Anyone could tell me what to think or where to go. I ended up choosing my father, mainly because that's where I grew up. In a sense I squashed my mother out of my life. I may not have pushed her out entirely, but I chose my father over her.

I'm not suggesting that a student must

come from a divorced household to connect with this story, nor do I want to imply that all students from divorced families are unhappy. Jane's parents are still together. However, she notes that,

My first thoughts weren't about the symbols in “Gaston” or the meaning of the story. They were about imagining my life with my family torn apart... My life almost entirely depends on my parents still being together. “Gaston” showed me how my life would change if my parents decided they weren't meant to be anymore. I never realized the difference between a family torn apart and a family still together and I have a new respect for children who have experienced that difference.

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Beyond the contemporary phenomenon of divorce, however, and as any child psychologist (or teacher) knows, the vast majority of adolescents from all families wear shells of some sort. Perhaps this veneer is a defense against the social demands of high school, or perhaps a shield against what they face at home. Either way, "Gaston" serves as a catalyst to recognizing and confronting some of these issues. From my ninth graders to my community college classes, my students produce some of their strongest, most honest writings, with many telling me that the last response essay was the toughest yet most rewarding essay they ever wrote.

### A Student Teacher's Perspective

Steve: I have learned that a teacher can serve as a change-agent, and that exposing students to controversial or confrontational story lines is a sure way to get them talking and writing about the material. I don't always have the opportunity to change the attitudes of those who view reading as a mostly passive activity. But by bringing emotionally charged literature to the classroom, I can instill in my students an inquisitiveness that they may never realize if they simply continue to read more traditional, ostensibly 'safe' texts. As an early career teacher, I want to take certain risks with the literature I choose. I know that the way to develop interaction with my students is to let students discover stories that go be-

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yond a safe structure and story line; after all, I've learned that if I bring them something different, they will respond positively, differently, and make a greater investment in the story and its implications. Of course, not all the stories in my classroom are going to be confrontational, but many of them will provide stimulating reading for students who are bored with the largely vanilla and insular material assigned to them.

In Simao's classroom, I found that with "Gaston", a story about separation and losing one's way in the world, my students and I can confront the conflicts in a society that too often values happiness and safety over exploration and discussion of serious issues, and where topics of divorce and alienation are not high on the reading list. However, many of my students are in re-married families or single-parent homes and these children often feel a certain loneliness that comes with their situation. "Gaston" can help them understand that mostly everyone whose parents have gone through a divorce has to deal with the feelings that the father and daughter have.

Whether through literature or the social atmosphere of the classroom, students have to know that they're not alone in the world.

I found that teaching these texts gave me an opportunity to inspire my students. Bringing a confrontational story to the classroom is never easy, and I felt a little uncomfortable at first. But I realized that the meaningful literature that I was giving to the students could po-

tentially make a difference in a young person's life, and that is what teaching is all about. After seeing the students' reaction to the text, I realized that my initial nervousness was actually excitement. I was sharing an invigorating text with the students, and their enthusiasm carried me to a new level of confidence as a teacher.

So too, I know that before I teach "Gaston" or any other confrontational text in my own classroom, I will have a discussion with the students about the nature of the story, but without revealing any specific details. We will first talk about the themes of the confrontational texts, including loneliness, isolation, anger, or a feeling of helplessness. I will have my students write a brief constructed response about a time that they felt these emotions, if for no other reason in order to determine their preparedness for the story. My students will begin the semester with short stories like "Gaston" and "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," stories that will require them to think deeply about their own feelings and opinions. In this way, we will build up to texts like *Of Mice and Men*, which examine the same types of issues in a much lengthier and broader context.

As a new teacher, I

will be actively looking for interesting, provocative material like "Gaston" to create a reading buzz in my classroom. I want my students to be as energized and inspired about the work as I am; that kind of learn-

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ing environment will help keep students involved, interested, and excited to learn about the characters and lives unfolding that symbolize more than just another day at school.

### The Authenticity of Confrontation

Simao: The last novel my ninth graders read is Glendon Swarthout's *Bless the Beasts and Children*, the high school novel that made me want to go into English as a career; and it is another of those confrontation pieces that takes students far beyond literary and reader-response paradigms. While it

deals with dysfunctional families and feelings of alienation, it also tackles motifs of the American West, of sacrifice and grace under pressure, of leadership and, most importantly, of children overcoming the identities society has placed upon them. I set up a blog for my students, provide them a series of guide questions each week, then allow the natural conversations to wash over the classroom. Under the auspices of internet

anonymity (students use a screen-name only I know), my students freely discuss the novel's themes and events and connect them with their own family dynamics, both positive and negative. Parental roles, Christ imagery, social misfits, psychological symbolism, peer pressure, leadership qualities, family pressures: my students discuss these in light of the novel and the world outside the classroom. It is as real a forum as can ex-

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ist in any English class and there are times when the novel becomes almost a secondary consideration.

Of course, ultimately, it is not our job as English teachers to serve as ad hoc, pop therapists in our classrooms, and I'm always careful to steer the conversation—both oral and written—back to the text at hand when necessary. But it is our job to allow students to confront personal and societal issues through literature and writing. If authenticity is the goal of pedagogy, then students' reactions to these texts and others verify that goal. Another astute student, Joe, writes indirectly about the loss of magic in "Gaston" through his own experiences:

The story made me think about what my dad had to go through [after his divorce]. He had to quit his job as a marine engineer, find a new job, and find someone to watch over me. He loved his job, but he quit it gladly and found a new one close to home. The hard part was the normal, day-to-day stuff, like finding a daycare center to put me into. It's like that for the father in the story: at first he has his daughter there, he's bonding with her, he seems to have a real family going. When he gets back from buying the peaches and his daughter has to leave, his life becomes dull and boring again.

Those students whose situations resemble the story in "Gaston" may never be able to reunite the split peach, never be able to reform the skin on its flawed surface, but they can confront their role and what actions they have taken and are taking. If they have already chosen to squash the bug, so be it; but for many this story, like all good literature, lets them see themselves through a different lens, and, when Gaston appears again,

waving his feelers and blinking in confusion, they may choose to let him live, because wandering on the empty plate can be better than not being able to wander at all. Of course, as might be expected, between the three perspectives of teacher, student teacher, and students, a student's observation makes the best closing: Jane observes, "Love is a powerful and seldom thing; we should feel lucky to have love once, not expecting the chance of having it again."

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