

Teaching *Frankenstein* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* Using Affective Literacy

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Introduction

This article has come about due to a synthesis of my experience and research into English teaching pedagogy. Whenever I taught a text, I found that the best methodology to use was one that analysed the piece for the most affective elements that were present and constructed lessons around these elements. This conscious search for emotional content also leads to improved engagement with the language, characters and the plot of the story by the students.

However, the articulation of these processes is not so straightforward. I have found elements of what happens when a teacher looks for emotional content and uses it to construct their classes in reader response theory (Holland 1968), in that great English classes narrow in on the affects that are present in texts, and they make them live through the work that the teachers and students share. On the other hand, it is important to note that the affects that motivate and excite the class into increased levels of sustained reading and analysis with respect to texts were also connected to the social and cultural aspects that were under scrutiny through study. This resonates with much of the recent discussion about English teaching in Australia and critical literacy (Luke 2000). The study of literature should be relevant to students' lives, in that it concerns social and cultural issues in contemporary society. The practice of affective literacy as put forward in this article therefore combines social and cultural interest with psychological stimulation; English teaching in this context will deal with the forces of power that are present in our lives and that construct and reconstruct subjectivities both on the inside and from the outside.

Affective literacy

The historian Mark Amsler (2004) has used the term 'affective literacy' to describe the ways in which medieval texts were read. This reading constituted an acting-out of the action. The major players, the

dialogues and plot had to be understood in a bodily manner – one that leads to reliving the story through reading. This is in contrast to the present understanding of literacy that tends to focus on the linguistic abilities of the subject. Such an understanding of literacy is backed up and reinforced through standardised testing and public concern about skills such as spelling. Using affective literacy as a means to enhancing English pedagogy by making the text come alive does not disavow the standard literacy skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Instead, it shifts our focus as English educators to influence our decisions in terms of textual choice and practice, with the unified aim of raising the literacy skills of all our students.

What factors should influence our choices when we use the affective literacy approach? Certainly English teachers must develop an affective relationship with the text that they wish to teach in the first place (Misson & Morgan 2005). This means engaging with the work in a way that would touch them personally. Stories about characters that they feel nothing for, or are unmoved by, will not easily translate into affective sessions with the students. Once the teacher has established their connection with the text; they may go about differentiating it into affective themes. These themes should relate to the social context in which they are teaching. Topics that have no bearing or relevance on the lives of the students will quickly become abstract and impersonal. Affective literacy sessions should be interactive and allow opportunities for negotiation and evaluation of the tasks, especially with respect to assessment. Repetitive pedagogic choices will destroy affective content, in that students are less likely to participate in the sessions if they know exactly what will happen next. This could lead to them struggling to engage with the textual content to the extent required to make affective literacy work. In effect, the teacher applying affective literacy pedagogy in an unresponsive manner may unwittingly form an affective barrier to engagement through the

repetition of the same (Irigaray 1977/1985). The teachers and students using affective literacy pedagogy need to endeavour to keep the imaginations of everyone concerned with the activity alive (Greene 1995); and through this process they should challenge the students and themselves to think differently about texts and society.

1. *Frankenstein*

The first text that I have chosen to demonstrate how to use affective literacy is the classic horror story by Mary Shelley (1818/1831). The affective literacy approach is an appropriate English pedagogy for *Frankenstein* as the themes that Shelley has incorporated into the story are emotive and powerful, enabling the teacher to take these themes out of the story, and to prepare individual lessons or units of work around them. This helps to alleviate the common problem that some students have when they read *Frankenstein*, in that the density of the language that Shelley used can, at times, obscure the story and the consequent enjoyment in reading. Affective literacy in this context allows the student to analyse dramatic sections of the text and to take away the most salient issues through dynamic exercises.

Lesson Plan One – *The Monster*

Target group

Grade 10

Lesson objectives

To analyse the creation of the monster in *Frankenstein*

To relate the monster to the idea of ‘the other’ in human society

To understand how the character of the monster functions in *Frankenstein*

Lesson procedures/materials

This lesson can work as a stand-alone session, or be embedded in a series of lessons that focus the students on the idea of the monstrous in *Frankenstein* and society. The teacher will begin by asking the question: What is a monster? The class will construct a spider-diagram to represent the responses around the idea of the monster: e.g., ugly, strange, frightening, etc. The teacher will then distribute three sections of the story that describe the monster to different groups. Each group will read their particular section and answer the questions:

1. What language does Shelley use to describe the monster?
2. How do the monster and/or Victor Frankenstein feel at this point in the story?
3. What is the relationship between the monster and his

creator Victor Frankenstein in your section?

Each group will feedback their responses to the rest of the class. This whole-class discussion will be guided by the question: How does Shelley create otherness through writing about the monster?

Follow-up work can include analysis of the monster as portrayed in films and the media.

Curriculum links

This English literature session will connect with the social sciences in that discriminated groups become ‘the other’ to the mainstream through the processes that Shelley describes in *Frankenstein*.

Assessment of session

This lesson is based upon reading about and responding to the monster in *Frankenstein*. Teachers should be aware of the level of engagement and articulation of the ideas by the students. A formal oral presentation or written piece regarding the idea of the monstrous in *Frankenstein* and society could be developed.

This example introduces an important idea that runs through affective literacy practices; and that is the analysis of ‘the other’. This term resonates with psychological and sociological aspects of power in that we all have personal demons that may become other to us, and mainstream society has tended to single out and discriminate against what are perceived as ‘others’. The monster in Shelley is the classic construction of otherness. He is not human, but he is also not part of nature. This worrying thought emphasises the affective nature of the idea. Is the monster Victor Frankenstein’s alter ego? What do we sacrifice when we ruthlessly pursue our goals? The otherness of the monster also resonates with the ways in which physical deformity, disease, obesity and disabilities are treated and categorised as other by mainstream society.

1.2 Lesson Plan Two – *Horror*

Target group

Grade 9

Lesson objectives

To examine the idea of horror in *Frankenstein*

To act out scary scenes from *Frankenstein*

To make connections between the Gothicism of *Frankenstein* and everyday life.

Lesson procedures/materials

This lesson will concentrate on the aspect of horror in *Frankenstein*. As one of the prime examples of Gothic litera-

ture, this lesson may be embedded in other lessons that focus on horror in *Dracula* or in popular films such as *Nightmare on Elm Street*. The teacher will start the session by trying to surprise the students for dramatic effect. They could wear a mask or speak in a scary voice, or tell them a short scary story with the lights in the classroom off. Focus question for class discussion after this experience: How does this make me feel?

The lesson will progress into the enactment of three horrifying scenes from *Frankenstein* in groups. The preparation and performance of these plays should also be a formative English literary experience in that students should consider the style and form of each scene. They should write dialogue and prepare a stage that enhances the horror of the moment:

1. The birth of the monster: One group will re-enact the moment that the monster is born. This critical point in the novel is filled with suspense.

2. The passage of action where the monster learns language and values from the people in the cottage, and subsequently wants to be accepted by them. Once he comes out of hiding, they see his deformities and react with revulsion.

3. The meeting between Victor Frankenstein and his monster in the ice cave. This pivotal scene of the story between the creator and the created is rife with horror.

The lesson ends with a discussion about the three plays and how these aspects of fear might be present in everyday life: e.g. situations getting out of control such as addictions or obsessions, being rejected or discarded by groups, or meeting your own worst nightmare!

Curriculum links

This lesson based on a literary text uses drama techniques to explore horror. It could also be connected with the arts in terms of representing feelings of horror through painting and music in follow-up lessons.

Assessment of session

The plays may be assessed using class generated criteria such as audience impact, quality of dialogue, meaning and relevance, pace and dramatic structure.

This second lesson draws on the universal affective power of fear. This is not in order to make the students more fearful, but to use it so that they engage with the creation of horror in the text. The teacher might want to cue up video snippets and show them to each group so that students get a better idea about particular scenes. The teacher could also prepare summaries of the action at each point in the story for the students to read, which would alleviate the fact that students might be put off by Shelley's use of language in the novel and therefore

not engage with the activity. This lesson should be fun and interactive, and shows how affective literacy prioritises the connection between language and the acting-out and experiencing of this language. It could be extended over several periods so that students have time to practise their drama pieces and use the arts, such as music and dance, to explore the creative possibilities of the scenes.

1.3 Lesson Plan three – *Passion*

Target group

Grade 11/12

Lesson objectives

To read a section of *Frankenstein* and analyse it for emotional content

To understand some of the complex passions of Mary Shelley

To make connections between Romanticism and *Frankenstein*

Lesson procedures/materials

This lesson focuses on the ways in which Victor Frankenstein is guided and dictated by Shelley's underlying passions. It could be embedded within a complete novel study of the text, or the study of key romantic authors, such as Byron or Goethe. The teacher starts the session by emphasising the links with Romanticism in *Frankenstein*. Key terms of reference to introduce the ideas of this lesson include; the idealisation of nature, moral inquiry and the science of emotions. Students will read an on-line article about *Frankenstein* at: <http://www.watershedonline.ca/literature/frankenstein/prometheus.html>

Discussion questions: What are the passions of Prometheus as portrayed by this critic?

How did Shelly succeed in portraying heightened passion through the writing of *Frankenstein*?

What is the significance of the male-female distribution of attributes in the story of *Frankenstein*?

Groups can choose one question to work on and feedback to the rest of the class at the end of the session with their findings. They will find textual references from *Frankenstein* to back-up their assertions. This feedback should include a discussion about the ways in which Shelley has used emotional intensity to add meaning and power to her story. The protagonist follows his passion to its logical conclusion without regard for the consequences. This resonates, for example, with the contemporary tension between scientific exploration and environmental effects. Shelley pointed this out in 1818 through the writing of *Frankenstein*.

Curriculum links

This English lesson requires deep engagement with the text

and an essay on the passions in *Frankenstein*. Students should be able to make links from this session with psychology and philosophy.

Assessment of session

This lesson could lead to the completion of an essay that relates to one of the discussion titles.

2. *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The second text that I use to show how affective literacy works in the classroom context is Jean Rhys's (1966/2000) novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This book may be studied at pre-tertiary level as part of an English Literature course. However, the themes that I have drawn out from this novel may be taught at any grade, as they demonstrate universal affective topics that should engage students in affective literacy sessions. Teachers may therefore take these lesson plans and adapt and convert them for their context by taking texts from Australian or colonial history. In so doing, they may apply the principles of affective literacy to literature study throughout the high school curriculum.

2.1 Lesson Plan One – *Racism*

Target group

Grade 11/12

Lesson objectives

To understand the issue of racism as presented in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

To examine sections of text that deal with racism

To make connections between colonial and contemporary society

Lesson procedures/materials

This lesson provokes the students to think about racism and its context in the British Empire. The teacher starts the lesson by handing out pieces of paper with different tones, ranging from pure black to pure white. The students will be asked to categorise the tones from the most black to the most white, and to think of suitable names for each. The teacher will guide the students to understand that this process was prevalent in the British Empire and was applied to people.

In the next section of the lesson, the class breaks into groups and finds descriptions of characters that appear in the text. Half of the class should concentrate on section 1, the other section 2. Each group answers the questions:

1. What language does Jean Rhys use to describe the characters?

2. What are the racial overtones of this language in terms of the construction of characters?

The groups give feedback to the rest of the class with their findings. Discussion of racial issues in *Wide Sargasso Sea* should be extended to make connections with recent occurrences in Australian society. How does colonialism still play a role in Australia?

Curriculum links

There are clear links in this session with SOSE and history. Yet the teacher should emphasise the personal qualities of the lesson as it also about language and meaning.

Racism still generates interest and controversy despite the influences of egalitarian pedagogy and the values of multicultural education in a democratic society. Rhys beautifully portrays the reality of racist colonial language use that permeated the whole of Jamaican society. She also shows how the use of English carries with it factors of discrimination in colonial society, such as the values of the plantation owners or Christianity. Students may be stimulated to explore these influences in colonial history, as well as the powerful facts of slavery. All these topics could become the focus of extended investigations, which shows how affective literacy literary engagements may branch out into the discovery of related facts and histories that add life to the text. Teachers using different stories that explore Australian colonial history for affective engagement may tackle similar projects looking at convict histories or Aboriginal subjugation.

2.2 Lesson plan Two – *Men & Women*

Target group

Grade 11/12

Lesson objectives

To understand the gendered writing of *Wide Sargasso Sea*

To analyse sections of *Wide Sargasso Sea* for language that carries gender bias

To examine the difference between male and female perspectives on the world

Lesson procedure/materials

The teacher asks students to write down a short description (50 words) of an event that they all have experienced. Individual students will read their descriptions and the whole class will analyse how the boys have picked out different aspects of the event, and used varying language from the girls.

The boys will be handed a section of part one of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the girls will analyse a section of part two.

They will look at:

1. Use of adjectives
2. The detail of characterisation
3. How the narrators connect themselves with nature and other people.

The students should find that part one uses a rich array of adjectives, goes into more depth when describing character and that the narrator makes subtle and nuanced connections with everything around her. In contrast, the narrator of part two uses more literal adjectives, lacks understanding about others, and places an 'apartness' between himself and the outside world.

Class discussion: Is this true of gender divisions in Australian society? What evidence do they have for their assertions?

Curriculum links

This lesson is a focused English literature period that also requires the skill of self-reflection. This emphasis connects with sociology and psychology.

One of the great joys of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the way in which Rhys contrasts the narrative perspectives in part one and part two. Part one is narrated by Rhys' heroine, Antoinette, and it is clear from the start that this is where Rhys' sympathies lie. Antoinette is the 'mad woman in the attic' in *Jane Eyre* (Brontë 1847/2003), the classic 'other' of English literature. Not only was she Rochester's first wife, she was also a Creole, which made her even more of a figure of mystery and intrigue. Rhys attempts to unpack this character by writing her pre-history before she went to England, and before she married Rochester. She is an extraordinarily sensitive and aware young woman; sensual and profound, responsive and impulsive, and the witness to the ruins of colonial enterprise in Jamaica. In contrast, Rochester is cold and calculating, disconnected from nature and Jamaican society. This brilliant difference and consequent story may be used by the teacher as an affective impulse to study the text. It should also give the students the tools to investigate other texts that show gender divisions. Follow-up sessions may include analysis of TV programs such as *McLeod's Daughters*, which portray similarly gendered role models. This lesson shows how affective literacy is connected to critical literacy, which often asks students to think critically about stereotypical and gendered character portrayals in the media.

2.3 Lesson plan three – Madness

Target group

Grade 11/12

Lesson objectives

To understand the madness of Antoinette

To analyse how Jean Rhys uses language to demonstrate madness

To make connections between madness and otherness

Lesson procedure/materials

The teacher should state at the beginning of this lesson that madness is no joke. They could do this by discussing data about mental disease in contemporary Australia, available at: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/mentalhealth/index.cfm>

This should provide a chance for students to express any anxieties that they have about this topic. Students will analyse three sections of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in groups and answer the questions:

1. What is Antoinette's state of mind at this juncture?
2. What language does Rhys use to indicate madness?
3. What are Antoinette's major relationships at this point in the text?

The groups will feed back their findings and a picture of Antoinette's mental state should emerge. In part one she is extremely sensitive and open to every sensation around her. Students should pick up that this openness could lead to not being able to cope with reality, especially in the context of Antoinette's life. In part two, Antoinette's madness is constructed by Rochester. The group with this section of text should pick up how he positions her behaviour as mad. In part three, madness is fully apparent, and students should have no trouble in identifying the mad language usage and intense emotional states of Antoinette.

This lesson concludes with a broader discussion about madness and otherness. This is the process by which people experiencing mental difficulties are excluded and pushed out of the mainstream. Students could sensitively discuss the case of David Hicks, or any personal anecdotes that come to mind.

Curriculum links

This is an English literature session that enables students to speak in a focused manner about madness. It therefore connects strongly with the health curriculum.

The issue of mental health can be a difficult topic to broach at any stage and in any area of education. In *Jane Eyre* the way in which Rochester locks Antoinette up in his attic is an analogy for how mental disease has been dealt with by 'respectable' society through isolation, seclusion and misunderstanding. This is an extremely

affective theme, which can be usefully taught through literature. Jean Rhys deals with madness in an insightful manner. Her representation of Antoinette's plight may teach them to shy away from labelling madness, and to explore the factors that go into creating mental illness, both social and psychological. This lesson takes the affective topic of madness and situates it through understanding how an author has used language to build a picture of a character who has been universally labelled as being mad.

Applications of affective literacy

From these two textual encounters, it may be seen that affective literacy is a practice with broad educational implications. It is transformative in that the deliberate use of affective issues powers these lessons. Emotional content guides the pedagogic choices of the teachers and the focus of the students. The intention behind this strategy is to increase engagement in reading and to work on the attitudinal and creative aspects of the English teaching classroom. It is concerned with the pleasure of reading (Clark & Rumbold 2006) in that the enjoyable, interactive and gripping content of texts is focused upon, explored and used to help push the intentions of the class. Whilst these choices necessitate a positive subjective proclivity on the part of the teacher, the decisions of the teacher should also be embedded in social and cultural values; as students must make connections between the teacher's choices and their own lives in terms of relevance and value. This affective pedagogy for using text can be applied to other curriculum discipline areas such as the humanities, drama, psychology, sociology or philosophy; as literacy encounters in all of these subjects require a thorough understanding and grounding in the workings of power.

It should be noted that affective literacy is distinct from critical literacy in that the social and cultural values that are explored through its implementation, do not necessarily engage with a discriminated group. Instead, they are guided by the values and themes present in the text. For example, the issue of slavery is a powerful theme that runs through *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and its representation in the text would certainly be picked up by teachers using critical literacy pedagogy as a primary theoretical approach to teaching English. As has been stated above, slavery could also become a focus of affective literacy sessions on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but only if the students perceive the emotional impact of this practice in their own social context. Affective

literacy pedagogy applied to *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the US would engage in the theme of slavery in a different manner to its implementation in Australian schools, where this issue is mediated by understanding how Empire building worked in terms of slavery.

Conclusion

This article is a guide for English teachers applying the principles of affective literacy pedagogy to their practice. This framework is flexible and open in terms of encouraging teachers to include their own affective concerns and to relate these ideas to their context and particular uses of texts. In summary, these principles include:

- Working on the affective themes of texts to make sure that the most engaging elements are prioritised through English teaching.
- Sensitivity to the social and cultural contexts of the issues involved with the lessons so that the students may relate them to their lives.
- Encouraging the pleasure and love of reading at all levels
- Writing with clear purposes and understandings in mind that link to the affective concerns of the classes.
- Open discussion of the affective focuses of the lessons, which allows for different voices to be heard.
- Interactions between the values of the text, student, teacher and society, so that the affective forces present in the classroom may flow freely.

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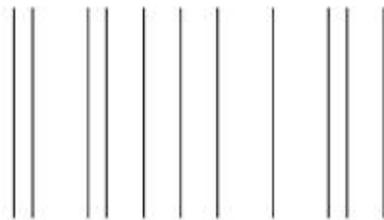
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