

Shorter Works Project

Before her class read *The Crucible* (Arthur Miller's play that examines the hysteria caused by the Salem Witch Trials), Katie and her students examined the actual court records from the trials. After the students had taken some time to read over the documents and journal briefly about what they thought, Katie opened up the floor for a class discussion. "Man, people just go off on each other don't they? What's wrong with them?" one sophomore replied. Through the students' examination of the actual Salem Witch Trial court documents, they came to understand that Miller's play is based on actual events that took place over four hundred years ago. Even more important, Katie explained that the catalyst for Miller to write *The Crucible* (about the Salem witch trials) was the McCarthy hearings, an event that occurred a mere fifty years ago. Having students read a shorter work that echoes the themes and story of a longer canonical work can be quite helpful as a pre-reading strategy. "Readers may apply to their reading what they know about the attitudes and values or 'ethos' of a particular historical period" (Beach and Marshall, 1990, p. 260). Historical and background information can aid students' understanding of and engagement with the text. With this kind of background information, students may consider and process different interpretations or explanations of a text. Through classroom discussion, the students also explored contemporary examples of times when public events become polarizing issues for the current society. Students addressed the corruptive influence of a few in a larger society through the McCarthy hearings and, in later years, the demise of corporate giants like Enron and MCI World Com. In addition, they discussed the polarizing issues of the particular time they were in—the involvement of President Clinton and his wife, Hillary, in the Whitewater scandal or the O. J. Simpson trial and the effect that groups can have on public opinion. They knew, from these present-day examples, that the events during the Salem Witch Trials were not isolated.

By applying historical and biographical information, students do more than simply recall facts; through these shorter works, they begin to see how a small group can create hysteria among a larger group of largely sensible individuals. They are exposed to the powers of manipulation and hysteria. Exhibit 2.9 contains some short works that can be used as pre-reading for larger classical texts. Exhibit 2.10 contains a pre-reading lesson. As Figure 2.1 demonstrates, shorter and longer works can be connected thematically. These connecting themes bridge meaningful connections between readers and texts. Once students make the thematic connections between texts, they are equipped to become more reflective in their reading and can offer comments like "I know from reading this that . . ." and "Questions I have from reading this are . . ."

Exhibit 2.9 Related Sample Short Works for Canonical Literature

Canonical Literature Title and Author	Sample Related Short Work and Author
"Beowulf"	"The Man Who Came Too Early" by Poul Anderson (contemporary science fiction story) "The Seafarer" (Anglo-Saxon poem)
<i>The Crucible</i> by Arthur Miller	Salem Court Documents (court records) Senator McCarthy Hearings (congressional documents)
<i>The Scarlet Letter</i> by Nathaniel Hawthorne	"Young Goodman Brown" by Nathaniel Hawthorne (short story)
<i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> by Maya Angelou	"Sympathy" by Paul Laurence Dunbar (poem)
<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i> by Erich Maria Remarque or <i>A Farewell to Arms</i> by Ernest Hemingway	"Death Be Not Proud" by John Donne "A Mother's Lament for the Death of Her Son" by Robert Burns "Death Is a Dialogue" by Emily Dickinson
<i>The Time Machine</i> and <i>War of the Worlds</i> by H. G. Wells	"Time Long Past" by Percy Bysshe Shelley

From Katherine S. McKnight and Bradley Berlage, *Teaching the Literature Classics in the Inclusive Classroom: Reader Response Activities to Engage All Learners*. Copyright © 2007 by Jossey-Bass. Reprinted by permission of Jossey-Bass.

Figure 2.1 Connecting Text Worlds

Title of First Shorter Literary Work _____		Title of Second Shorter Literary Work _____	
I know from reading this that...	Questions I have from reading this are:	I know from reading this that...	Questions I have from reading this are:

Connecting themes of Literary Work _____	
I know from reading this that...	Questions I have from reading this are:

From Katherine S. McKnight and Bradley Berlage, *Teaching the Literature Classics in the Inclusive Classroom: Reader Response Activities to Engage All Learners*. Copyright © 2007 by Jossey-Bass. Reprinted by permission of Jossey-Bass.

Exhibit 2.10 Shorter Works Pre-Reading Lesson

Pre-Reading Lesson	Shorter Works As a Bridge
---------------------------	----------------------------------

Objective	Create an atmosphere by pre-reading shorter works where students can potentially connect with different text worlds. This is key in creating effective pre-reading strategies.
Materials	Shorter works related to the canonical literature being studied
Time	45 minutes

Procedure	
------------------	--

Step 1	Pass out a copy of the related shorter work to each student.
Step 2	After students read these copies, place the students into groups to discuss the shorter works.
Step 3	Ask the students the following questions: What did you think of these documents? What other issues from our time reflect these same sentiments?

IRA/NCTE Standards	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic, and contemporary works.2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
--------------------	--
