



Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue

Patrick Murphy

Nord University, Norway

Abstract

*The recent amalgamation of traditional teacher training colleges into universities as seen in Norway has caused a clash of interests between the profession-based approach of the teacher training staff and that of traditional academical approach of university traditions. Differing views on e.g. the importance of canonical literature for teacher training students have led to a partly compartmentalized teaching of classic and canonical literature on the one hand, and subject pedagogy on the other. This article is based on action research in the classroom and shows how one may blend classic literature into the world of the teacher training student within the concepts of the extended classroom and in-depth learning. Here it is not merely a matter of scaling boundaries of compartmentalized university subjects, but also the mental barriers between traditional classroom teaching and the sensibility of the individual's world beyond the classroom walls. This paper shows how Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem *The Lady of Shalott* [1] is the backdrop for not only a reader-response approach to literature, but also a creative approach that leads the readers to understanding through triggering the interests and experiences of their world of audio and visual impressions and experiences. As the *Lady of Shalott* breaks the curse and leaves her world enclosed by four walls, so will this session break a few barriers and conventions leading to a student active learning session where it is not a question of being served a traditionally accepted interpretation of the poem, but rather one of triggering personal experiences and preferences. This paper is intended to give the language teacher a little input in creatively accommodating teaching and learning literature through a hands-on session. Not only by seeing - but also making - the connections between various subjects and concepts the learner may gain a greater understanding of classic literature within the often-fragmented world of higher education. This paper focuses on the learner creating an understanding as a contrast to in traditional literary analysis being served an understanding. This is the journey of *The Lady of Shalott* breaking the fourth wall and taking the learner along with the flow.*

Keywords: student activity, teaching literature, breaking barriers

This paper is the follow-up to *The Lady of Shalott Breaks the Fourth Wall and goes with the Flow* [2], where the concept of seeing canonical literature in light of in-depth learning through breaking the fourth wall [3] and flow theory [4] is the focal point. The paper presents some principles of transcending subject barriers and compartmentalization of a more traditional university approach to teaching literature, opening up for a more learner centred and practical approach desired in teacher training. The paper ends with leaving the proverbial door ajar for how this may be done – which is the focal point of this paper.

The object of this paper is to show how *The Lady of Shalott* may be used as an exercise in understanding poetry with a reader-response approach, with elements specifically connected to transactional reader-response theory as promoted by Louise Rosenblatt [5] [6], and thus serves as a stark contrast to the concept of affective stylistics fronted by Stanley Fish [7]. I boldly claim that if you can draw it, you can understand it; showing communicative clarity through encoding and decoding, where the object is to accurately decode through drawing an encoded text [8]. The concept of text used in this paper is founded on the Norwegian National Curriculum for primary education, where text is defined as not only words, but also images, music, and film [9], which indeed supports the view of a text being multimodal. In the case of *The Lady of Shalott*, it is due to the passage of time not possible to faithfully decode and replicate an understanding through illustration that is true to the inner eye of Tennyson. Working with literature in the light of a reader-response approach, the understanding of Tennyson's writing needs to be seen in the context of the reader, literally in the eye of the beholder. Tennyson has based his 1832 poem on Elaine of Astolat of Arthurian legend, and in order for the students to closer identify themselves with the poem's heroine, her first name is used. The following task-based learning session has been part of my teaching and action research between 2018 and 2024, and though most of the student input and response presented in this paper is from two sessions in January 2023, some of the student input and response has been observed and collected from previous and later sessions.

The learning session presented in this paper is task based, where the students initially work in groups of four, where the groups later mingled with each other as the state of flow set in. Groups of four start by together illustrating each of the poem's four parts; and Googling for an analysis or explanation of the poem is not permitted; a requirement the students have respected. Following the



understanding of the text in terms of physical layout, location, and action, it is possible to find a deeper meaning. Through all stages, the teacher prompts, initiates, and partakes in discussion about what Tennyson himself might have meant by his text, and how his contemporaries *might* – from our perspective – have understood and reacted; all in the perspective of our times and own understanding. My students are presented with the poem, with little or no further ado than a *brief* introduction to Tennyson and his time. The path to understanding through contextualisation emerges via three more or less clearly defined stages, where the first one naturally is the semantic understanding of the text; what do the words actually mean, and what surface story does the text convey.

The first stage is a combination of individual reading and cooperative learning [10]; experience has shown that most students struggle a little with Tennyson's language and students do initially not quite get the concept and ideas, so common ground for joint effort is one of slight bewilderment. Each student has understood parts of the poem, and collectively they are able to form a common semantic understanding of the text. Unfamiliar words are not always readily found in a modern dictionary, and the understanding of them is pieced together through strategic thinking, comparisons, and visualization. To promote problem solving techniques through association, the students are prompted to not look up words in a dictionary. Adding associations to words and concepts in the text ensures that students gradually work themselves into a flow state as the associations start running free.



(Fig.1 student drawing)

The second stage is the multimodal imagery of the text, where the students see connections between Tennyson's text and their own world. The two stages may in principle be seen as separate, but in practice there is a partial overlapping. The multimodal visualisation of the text is based on associations by words, images, videos, and concepts. The third stage is delving a little deeper into the multimodal associations of stage two, where the written words, the associated images, and associated music is studied more closely. Regardless of text format, it is a question of coding and decoding, where the students decode Tennyson's text based on number of elements or filters, such as reading competence, vocabulary inventory, expectations, interests and life experience beyond the classroom walls – to mention but a few. Prior to presenting the task, I introduce the concept of stream of consciousness, a term first coined by Alexander Bain in 1855 [11] and first used in a literary context by novelist May Sinclair in 1908 [12]. To shed some light on contextualization, and triggering their own experiences, I ask them to recognize a reverse stream of consciousness: "While dozing in the sun, you wonder why on earth you are thinking about what you are thinking about; then try and retrace your thoughts as far back as you can". By triggering the learners' own experience, the concept of stream of consciousness is conceptualised on a personal level for each learner, rather than merely a factual genre trait or literary device presented from the teacher's side of the lectern. The outcome of the session is a multi-modal (re)presentation of the poem. Fig. 1 is a sample illustration of the poem's part 1 where setting and context is introduced. Through the years, I have seen numerous student drawings, where they mostly have followed the conventions of western text writing and timelines; the island top left and the river flowing towards bottom right and Camelot. Interestingly, this is not the case for the sample drawing included here, where the island has a central position, and the river flowing towards the top of the paper. When asked, the student was not sure about the reason for this, other than the island being important and everything else goes on around it. Sparking an interesting discussion on the logic of time, directional flow of rivers and perspective within the group, the students arrived at the conclusion that the placement of the river flows towards the top of the paper to illustrate flowing away from the viewer, rather than eventually bringing Elaine and the boat closer by flowing

towards the bottom of the paper. Sparking a lively discussion on conventions of direction, depth, and physical size of the sheet of paper, the students conclude that it makes little or no difference to the distance from the viewer. Besides, sitting around a table as a group (yes, the smart student compared this to King Arthur's round table), the perspective would always be correct for some in the group. On the central placement of the island, the group reached a consensus that based on their process, the drawing de facto functions as a visual brainstorming session, where the development of the drawing is not only a representation of the semantics of the text, but also associations of the world of the students. Freely associating the text with the students' own world – or vice versa – triggers previous experiences, interests, and schemata of learners; individually and collectively contextualising the poem and its individual components.

In this second stage of the task-based learning session we see the contours of a process befitting definitions or classifications for in-depth learning. Already in the first verse the students discuss what type of corn barley is in Norwegian, and quickly turn to Sting's *Fields of Gold*. The concept of field then becomes an issue, and here one of the groups start brainstorming "field", as in football field, which leads to one group member referring to the *Fields of Athenry*, written in 1979 by Pete St. John in the style of an Irish folk ballade, and sung by both Irish national and Celtic football supporters at their football games. The presumably unintendedly cunning double take on rye and field admittedly focuses on initial visual and auditory recognition, rather than historic and textual depth. Playing around with the concept of field, American actress Sally Fields' name comes up. Prompting what brings that name to attention other than her surname, the response is that she has tragic roles and Elaine is a tragic character - just as one of the students perceived Norwegian actress Liv Ullman. The following heated discussion on this matter becomes a session with elements of cooperative learning, as not all younger students are acquainted with Liv Ullman. Though a dead end in terms of piecing together the meaning of Tennyson's poem, this is but one of numerous examples of how tapping into one's existing knowledge and art of association leads to motivation through discovering new information; a discovery that is learner induced rather than teacher required. Including a collection of all associations is neither feasible nor necessary, but it is worth mentioning the fascination of the mirror, or rather the concept. Here references are made to superstition and bad luck, evoking memories of Snow White and the Queen's magic mirror, as well as a diversion to Agatha Christie's crime novel *The Mirror Cracked Form Side to Side*. The concept of the broken mirror crops up again later when students bring up and discuss Harry Potter's retrieval of the Sword of Gryffindor in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1 [13] and the following comparison with the retrieval of Excalibur in the 1981 movie *Excalibur* [14].

Getting the larger picture in more sense than one is important, and so is the understanding of the individual words to help provide a visualization and consequently an understanding. *Reaper* is one of the words that the students have heard, but yet one of those words or terms that is hard for a number of them to precisely describe. The Grim Reaper is the first association, though his relevance in the story is initially questioned. One would think Googling "reaper" would see success, so here I prompted them to go online. However, the students gave up as the first number of hits is for software for downloading music. Here it would be easy for the teacher to simply give the students the Norwegian translation of the word, thus doing so defeats the process and student involvement. I suggest a biblical reference to sowing and reaping, and the meaning becomes clear through a quick dash to retrieve childhood memories. Once on the theme of the Grim Reaper, suggested movies and TV series abound; not merely within the horror genre, but also of fun childhood series as in *The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy* [15]. Though all elements brought forth are not per se of direct value to the understanding of the poem, the process is of great value on two major points: 1) setting a tone of free-spirited cooperation and ensuing cooperative learning, leading to 2) the students getting into a flow zone where time is no longer an issue.

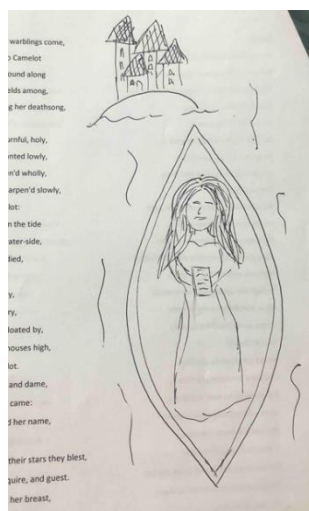
The second stage of free association gives way to numerous connections and recollections, and a mere snippet of the process and elements may be presented here. The initial free associating with and within the world of the students brings them into a flow zone, and utilizing the positive flow of energy, and the threshold to take a closer look at lyrics is low. Just one of many examples is moving from the energy of *Fields of Athenry* displayed by football fans, to the seriousness of the lyrics speaking of prison walls, transportation by ship to another world, and death in multiple forms. The imagery used in Sting's video relates further to Tennyson's poem through lyrics and the use of old stone walls and the combination of past and present in the same frame. The anger and urgency of the lyrics are brought forth by students finding and playing the more aggressive version of *Fields of Athenry* performed by American Celtic punk band Dropkick Murphys. The teacher may now carefully guide the students towards a closer defined area or topic, and it is now time to delve a little deeper in the third stage.

The river is but one of many portals to tapping into a more reflective approach of free associations. It is the word *river* that initiates the process, and common for most students, Bruce Springsteen's *The River* and the Dolly Parton/Kenny Rogers duet *Islands in the Stream* are most readily at hand. In this stage, the students are nudged towards looking beyond the initial audio and visual associations and dive a little deeper into the applicable texts. Note that at this stage the students do not work directly towards Tennyson's text and intended meaning, but are in the process of contextualizing within their own worlds. *The River* and *Islands in the Stream* serve as strong visualizations and are also diametrical opposites by Springsteen's song oozing melancholy, and Parton/Rogers coming across as light-hearted and optimistic; a line from the latter that is befit Sir Lancelot tempting Elaine: "Sail away with me to another world". However, common for both is the river



as inspiration and also as source of comfort and consolation. The concept of the river as a divide and a boundary to the netherworld is enlightened by references to the Ferry Man and Styx; the latter as in both Greek mythology and Chicago based rock band. The movies *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* [13] and *Hades* [16] both show similar scenes of bodies floating in water of death; a theme and imagery also depicted in *Lord of the Rings* [17]. Inevitably, death becomes a topic of concern, and the image of Elaine lying down in the boat and gliding into the flow of life to meet death on the river is intriguing. Asking the students to lie down on the floor and contemplate their life, the tendency for the students to lie on their backs with hands on chest and eyes closed is not to be overlooked. This moment of reflection is seen in connection with yoga and meditation practices of Eastern religions, peace, and harmony; a contemplation of the fullness of life and a peaceful way out of one world, and very much in contrast with the rage against the dying light in Dylan Thomas' *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night* [18]; a poem presented to the students as a contrastive setting of transition. By contextualizing the concept of *river*, the students have through their process developed a vivid understanding of river as dual symbolism; not merely from being informed by lecture, but through a connection to their world beyond the classroom and confines of traditional literary analysis.

Fantasy literature and myths are popular across the ages, both in sense of the passage of time, and that of the audience. Tennyson addresses this directly in his text by referring to the mythical world of Camelot and King Arthur; a topic which clearly engages the students. They are familiar with the legends of King Arthur, his knights, and round table; but not all are on first name terms with Excalibur. Not getting as deeply involved with discussions on myth versus truth, fantasy and science fiction literature and movies as my students have done, I would like to illustrate by example how the mythical world familiar to Tennyson and his contemporary readers is very much a part of interest and fascination today. The sword Excalibur is in this reader-response approach work with *The Lady of Shalott* linked to both literature and a variety of movie representations of the *Sword in the Stone* (the 1963 Disney version coming first to mind [19]), *Excalibur* [14], and also to the discovery of a 700-year-old sword stuck in a rock in the Vrbas River in Bosnia. Audio visual presentation and representation have an important place in the process of achieving in-depth learning, and as their teacher it is important to together with students see how things may be connected. I have thus included a couple of small video clips that popped up while working with *The Lady of Shalott* in order to illustrate how concepts and understanding may be interconnected. Aside from drawing attention to the shard of broken mirror in the hands of Harry Potter, the comparisons are best left to the eye of the beholder.



(Fig.2 student drawing)

The process and result of this session working with *The Lady of Shalott* brings out a number of aspects of in-depth learning. The most striking element is the students contextualizing the poem not to Tennyson's times, but to their own times; and not just the times, also to the individual student's interest and life experience. This process of contextualization and working within a stream of consciousness, in a flow zone, and teacher as co-learner and co-explorer may in a meaningful way contribute to addressing an issue that the university tradition is arguably not renowned for: Adapted learning. In teacher training there is a focus on the importance of the teacher trainees offering adapted learning to their future pupils. Sadly, my thirty years or so experience in higher education has seen a neglect of both giving the opportunity to and providing adapted learning to university students. Though times are changing, admittedly at different paces in different cultures, the university teacher is not always the best role model. In higher education the student is an adult and is expected to take responsibility for his or her learning process, so sadly the focus on provided adapted teaching and learning has been neglected by traditional lecturing. Working with audio visual and conceptual associations opens for adapted learning based not solely on the traditional weaker-stronger learner axis, but more interestingly as a combination of various learning styles in a combination with, interests



and academic level. Peers will more or less consciously adapt themselves to the direction the group's process takes, giving room for the individual to use learning style and approach that best suits the most prominent of the multiple intelligences [20], tapping into both interests and experience of life itself. Working together in the manner described in this paper quickly triggers a positive approach to working with canonical literature. The room for individuality has the effect of fostering cooperative learning, contextualization, and appreciativeness of the individuals' learning styles and dominating intelligences. The students piecing together the meaning of the poem by opening to and actively using impressions and associations from their world beyond the classroom walls has in practice proven to become a cooperative learning session not only among peers, but also for the involved teacher; set into motion and helped along where needed by the teacher concurring, enlightening, and gently guiding.

Elaine of Astolat breaks the fourth wall of her solitary confinement and life of shadows and mirrors, and steps into the physical world for enlightenment and communication therewith. So also do the students in this poetry session. Not physically as indicated by Elaine, but as breaking the fourth wall of the confines of their expectations of traditional literary analysis; thus, ultimately breaking their own mental barriers, and in this case seeing the confluence of Elaine's actions and their own. However, where Elaine breaks the spell cast upon her by leaving her confines and seeing the web fly *out* the window, the students break the spell of traditional literary analysis by letting their world *into* the classroom, utilizing the potential of their web, be it the internet or their web of collective experiences and ideas, letting the real world of association and stream of consciousness into their learning space. Though differing conditions and framework, the students recognize the process and journey of breaking barriers and including a world outside confines of physical or academic nature. Some 190 years before their time, Tennyson through Elaine clearly illustrates the need to communicate both *in* and *with* the real world to truly live and understand before transcending into another world of understanding. Paving the way for current thinking and approach to in-depth learning and my students' mental escapades: The Lady of Shalott does indeed break the fourth wall and goes with the flow.

Finally, the pièce de résistance that says it all; evoking comments by my students as "whenever I hear this song, I will forever think of our poetry session, The Lady of Shalott, and the meaning thereof".



(Fig. 3 If I Die Young)

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