

# “TEACHERS, LEAVE THOSE KIDS ALONE”

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Turning kids onto the imagery of poetry has long been a challenge to me. It seemed as though verbal images somehow eluded them, even turned them off. Yet, I had observed my two teenaged daughters glued to MTV for hours engrossed by the often fragmented images of music videos. I reasoned that the audio component fused with the visual images mesmerized them. However, when I sat with them to observe these videos for myself, I observed, instead, the reactions of my daughters. I overheard them commenting on the images, critiquing their credibility, drawing inferences and interpretations from those images; they were, in fact, dialoguing with the text in a way that Ann Berthoff contends “is centrally important to critical reading” (121).

Since standard approaches for teaching poetry had not worked for me, I found myself with “a wondering to pursue” (Bissex 3). I asked myself, if, when left to their own devices, teenagers can critically examine the visual imagery of videos, can they not do the same thing with poetry? As Steven North suggests, I needed to create new approaches to my inquiry in order to “produce new knowledge” (33). So I set about the task of investigating my “wonderings” by using a new approach to the teaching of poetry.

I introduced the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by drawing an analogy between the delivery of verbal images of the poem and the visual images of rock videos. I asked my students to close their eyes and pretend to see a television screen. On that screen they were to project the pictures that the words of the poem conjured up for them. I read the poem aloud, one image at a time, stopped and asked the kids to write down what they saw

on their TV screens. At the end of each class, we shared our perceptions.

For example, when I read,

“Like a patient etherized upon a table,”

they wrote:

“. . . dead . . . like not knowing, like in a hospital.”

“I saw a person just lying there dead.”

“Black blankness death”

When I read,

“. . . one-night cheap hotels  
and sawdust restaurants . . .  
let us go and make our visit.”

they wrote:

“a beat up town, dirty, cheap. a no ending road—he says  
don’t ask where we’re going—journey.”

“in a cheap hotel; he is restless because of the condition.  
Maybe the food tastes like sawdust—the streets always connect;  
they never stop—the question just like the streets, keep on  
continuing; Where are we going? What are we doing here?  
is the question.”

Within the first few lines of the poem, my students not only saw the images but they almost automatically formed interpretations. That is what I’d seen my daughters do when they watched MTV. As I continued to read the poem, the students continued to close their eyes, project the images they saw and, then, write them down and share.

“. . . the yellow fog,” etc.

“a monster protecting the house but why is it yellow?”

“licked tongue into corners—referring to cat.”

“the weather is always misty, damp. There is not much sunshine—Sunshine is at the end of the road and this place is only a pit stop.”

“It’s cold, clammy—smells weird—the touch of everything is dust—my mood would get much worse. I would hate being

there—I'd try to stay as 'perky' as possible. It probably would not help."

True, some of these responses are cliches, but look at the responders—teenagers. Godamer contends that ". . . concrete dealing with a text yields understanding only when what is said in the text begins to find expression in the interpreter's own language" (57). Cliche, an aspect of the language of teenagers, manifested itself as the way with which they concretely dealt with the text of the poem.

Other segments of the poem produced these responses:

"A mask that hides your inner feelings."

"You act however you want, make your own person, you can start over and build it up."

"He has done everything, seen everything, until he is done—has nothing else to do."

"When he's dead and looks like a painting on the wall, how is he going to tell everybody what he's done?"

"Doesn't know what he wants—seems to be trying to uncover his feelings."

"The mermaids aren't real. No dead—humans will make you die—if you stay in your own world, you'll be happier."

I was amazed by these responses for what the students "saw" went beyond mere visual perception. I observed with Godamer that "visualizing, making meaning by means of mental images, is the paradigm of all acts of mind; imagining is forming par excellence and is therefore the emblem of the mind's power" (65). Without analyzing or dissecting the poem, without the prodding or prescriptions of teacher-generated questions, these students not only saw the imagery but reflected the image into meaning. I came to understand what Ann Berthoff means when she states, "Perception is not something that comes first and then we get to ideas; perception is itself a construing, an interpretation, a making of meaning, a composing" (35). The act of responding in writing served to crystallize the perceptions and interpretations my students brought to the poem. Furthermore, since my students had been "allowed" to construct their own meanings from the poem, the

discussion that emerged from the foregoing activity was largely student generated and student facilitated. At this point in my investigation, I concluded that their engagement was rooted in my students' sense of ownership of their interpretations.

My investigator's curiosity got the best of me, so I took a risk and decided to find out what these kids saw in their music videos. Upon the recommendation of my sixteen-year-old daughter, I showed the class "The Wall" by Pink Floyd, a movie length video. After we saw the entire film, I replayed one section which featured the title song. I directed them to do exactly what they had done with Prufrock—record what they saw.

Throughout this film sequence, the lyrics of the song are repeated,

"We don't need no education.  
We don't need no thought control.  
No dark sarcasm in the classroom.  
Teachers, leave those kids alone.  
All in all we're just another brick in the wall."

The film sequence begins in the teacher's room of an English school. Upon hearing the bell, the teachers rise, march to their classrooms and "teach." The master of Pink's class discovers that Pink has been writing poetry and ridicules Pink in full view of the class. Duly humbled, Pink escapes into fantasy imagining his teacher dining with his wife who reprimands him for eating his meat. The fantasy changes. School children march in straight lines behind a brick wall from which they emerge identically masked, seated at desks which are drawn by a conveyor belt. Then the video bombards the viewer with fragmented images of children singing the lyrics of the song in a large classroom, in the school yard; other images of children marching, standing at attention, seated at desks appear. Finally, the children are seen being drawn by the conveyor belt into a giant meat grinder from which they emerge as chopped meat.

The image shifts again to the students exploding, destroying the desks, windows, books, setting the school in flames. In the midst of their celebratory rebellion, the kids throw their teacher into the flames. Here the fantasy ends, and Pink comes back to the reality of the classroom.

As my students recorded what they saw, they simultaneously generated interpretations of those visual images.

“Man acts mean because he now has a chance to be in control . . . at home his wife treats him like he treats the kids—at school it’s his time to be the big man. The kid dreams that all kids are alike—they mean nothing—just something for the man to yell at—they are just dog meat . . . break wall—be their own person.”

“. . . teacher feeling the wrath of himself in his wife.”

“Rows of children just sitting there—perfect—doing everything the same.”

“Kids on conveyor belt coming out in desks as they go down like their life. Listen to whatever anyone says—become clones of each other and the generation before.”

“No individuality, leading up to just being grinded away in the world.”

“. . . turned into playdough.”

“Perfect children dressed in perfect suits—look like perfect little adults—children ‘grinded’ into adults.”

“Revolting, revenge, revolution, outburst, destruction, hatred, killing of authority figure, killing for revenge.”

“burning it all—not hurting each other—just all the stuff that has hurt them—and now, the teacher gets what he deserves, the fool. Just like everyone else. Back up against the wall.”

Apparently, the visual images proved more generative than those verbal images in *Prufrock*, but in both the poem and the film what began as affect emerged into cognition. The images did not elude my students, and when they wrote their own responses without prescriptive assignments, they seemed compelled to make meaning for themselves.

Two students “compelled” to synthesize their responses added the following:

“He is a brick which did not fit, a break in the wall. He is one of the people who rebelled, repressed his hatred. He did it, though, through poetry, which the teacher called rubbish. He is sick of people telling him what he can and cannot do and he is going to rebel once again.”

“Bricks uniformly placed in a wall. Life macrocosm of the wall. People supposed to be like everyone—dull—boring—set by the foreman or teacher, in this case. People don’t have to uniformly fit together. Teacher seeks out student to mock and ridicule like a foreman making sure all stress points are taken care of and pointed out to be corrected. The wall of life made up of people, the bricks molded into shape and given a set foundation, held together by concrete, the knowledge. The kids rebelling, the foundation could be laid out in several different walls. The kids are the judges of their fate.”

At this point, I introduced another element beyond response in order to observe what my students would uncover next. I asked them to write other ways of saying, “Just another brick in the wall.” They generated the following:

Just another drop in the bucket.  
Just another star in the sky.  
Just another pebble in the dirt.  
Just another needle in the cactus.  
Just another scene in the play.  
Just another second on the clock.  
Just another station on the assembly line.  
Just another actor in an audition.  
Just another grade in a teacher’s book.  
One of the guys.  
I gotta be you.  
Masked by the mass  
Mill or me  
Patterns of people

Once again many cliches emerged, but these phrases did indicate that the students were able to connect the symbolic wall of the film to many other metaphors, symbols and related ideas.

Finally, I decided to see how they could create their own extended metaphors, so I asked them to choose one phrase from our collective list and use it as the title of an original poem. Several samples follow:

Just Another Grain in the Sand  
by Kate Hnatow  
The wind swept me across the ground

To find myself in a world of the unknown  
Where millions frolicked in the lake.  
I was stranded like a bird with no wings.  
Caged in an unfamiliar box.

Just Another Book in the Library  
by Fay O'Neill

Silence,  
as if the authors are still creating.  
The word echoes around the large room.  
There are words of Shakespeare, Poe.  
But one common bond links them all  
Writing.  
A technique known throughout the world.  
A style that enables us to be called civilized.  
Although when you look at it,  
It's just words on the pages.

Just Another Drop in the Bucket  
by Nikki De Vita

The drops of water slowly drop. They drop from the sky like babies born from the womb. They fall into a bucket, into a community of drops which are blended together, no one standing out. The leader, the bucket, contains the drops in an orderly fashion. When he moves, they move. They must follow him. The only way they are able to not follow and listen is to die, being evaporated by the sun. Some of the drops may believe the sun is a God because it lets them break away from the bucket. Yet another drop falls, slowly, unknowing what its life has planned for it.

Not only did these poems reflect an understanding of the theme of the film, but they also evoked the same sense of powerlessness as Prufrock. Did my students make a conscious connection to the theme of Prufrock? Were my students so programmed by the interpretations that they had formed reading Prufrock that they unconsciously brought those interpretations to the video? Or did they simply write these poems from the immediate context of their experience with the video? Whatever the reason, it seemed to me that we had come full circle so I decided to take my students back to the poem to see what would happen. After we re-read Prufrock in its entirety, I asked the students to respond to the whole poem

in any way they could. In the following journal entry, Cheryl connects the poem to herself and finally, to the video.

“From this poem I learned things about life—that you should take it seriously and not let it slip away. It made me sad. It reminded me of death. Not the kind where someone dies, but when you yourself die and you’re still alive. There’s nothing left to do. You have done everything and have no desire to do anymore. That poem taught me in a way to try and stay happy and not rush everything but take each day one step at a time. I also told myself I would check out any vacation spot I was planning to go to and make sure there were no towns, etc. like this place. It seemed like the world’s biggest cemetery for people who were still alive.

ADVERTISEMENT:

‘Want to get depressed? Make others more depressed? Come to so and so town and have a hell of a time! Free death beds available.’

It was so morbid. I also learned not to take life so seriously. Don’t be so down over something stupid. Because if you don’t stay happy and delighted with life then, “the human voices wake us and we drown” for real. That would mean there was no more time ever—like Prufrock we’d be just another brick in the wall.”

Cheryl’s written response to the poem reminded me of what Nancie Atwell discovered with her own students who use writing “as a way to capture their feelings, trying to give shape to their inner experience” (90). By capturing and recording her own feelings, Cheryl gave shape to her inner experience with the poem and, subsequently, the video.

Although I had designed this unit of study for me, it was not a teaching unit but a learning unit. Atwell reminds us that “When we change our role to that of an inquirer, we become learners, too” (90). I had done as Atwell suggests; I let my students instruct me in their own lives, a large part of which is music videos. Through them, they observe, interpret, compose and create. It is apparent to me that I need to continue to be instructed by my students so that the space my students and I share will continue to invite those experiments which allow us to grow into literate, creative people. By heeding the words of the song, “Teacher,



leave those kids alone,” I learned that kids can bloom from the fertile fields of their own experience.

When I read the rough draft of this paper to my sixteen-year-old daughter for feedback, she told me of her experience with poetry in her English class this past year. I end this piece by letting Juliette’s words speak for themselves.

“We learned iambic pentameter and trochaic, but we did not look at the poems for the beauty of the poems, and it was just boring. It was like just sticking bricks in the wall—putting it there and getting it done.”

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