Empowering the reader

Literary response and classroom learning

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Abstract

During interviews with university students in an English degree course, it was found that a majority of students expressed disappointment with their high school experience of English literature classes. Among the problems often cited were: frequent tests of superficial aspects of literary texts, the memorization of analytical terms unrelated to literary values, and being expected to guess the teacher's preferred interpretation. Dislike of reading literature appeared to be a common outcome of such practices. Reader response studies are examined as a basis for rethinking classroom methods. It is suggested that readers will be empowered to read literature with greater competence and pleasure by recognition of individual differences in response, by working with what readers find striking or evocative in the texts they read, and by facilitating readers' feelings during the act of reading. A revised conception of catharsis in literary response is proposed.

1. Teaching literature is impossible

Northrop Frye, the eminent Canadian literary critic, stated bluntly: "it is impossible to teach or learn literature: what one teaches or learns is criticism" (Frye, 1970, p. 75). The response to literature, in other words, cannot be taught. We can only teach *about* literature; we cannot communicate the literary experience itself. This is perhaps a truth too often forgotten, one of those truths that lies, as Coleridge's elegant phrase has it, "bedridden in the dormitory of the soul." In the next few pages I will consider the

implications of Frye's statement for teaching; but I want to start by noting in particular some of the consequences that come from disregarding it.

I am aware of literature classes in schools and at universities which, although often well intentioned, are laying waste to students' experiences of literature. Like the loggers in one of our northern forests, there are teachers in too many classes whose work succeeds only in clear cutting every shoot of literary interest, leaving hardly a stump behind, mainly for the sake of that giant pulp mill, the testing and examining of students. I will offer you some evidence for these claims, drawn from a number of students whom I interviewed recently; their comments, by the way, are consistent with recent studies of classroom practices in English (eg., Nystrand, 1991). Such studies suggest that teachers are being poorly served by the preservice and inservice training they receive, and that a better grasp of the theoretical issues involved in literary response is urgently needed in the profession.

The type and extent of the disabilities that follow a poor literary education are hard to estimate, but here are two indicators that I can mention. A recent pilot survey by colleagues at the University of Alberta (Tötösy and Kreisel, 1992) suggests that among even the well educated adult population in Canada, only 8% are regular readers of literary texts. A much higher proportion (about 70%) are regular readers of popular fiction, such as Danielle Steele or Stephen King. If one purpose of schooling is to encourage children to become readers of literature, this finding shows that we are failing drastically. Another statistic I can cite comes from an engineer, Rod Turpin, who spoke during a public meeting on the school system this February [1992] with our provincial education minister, Jim Dinning. He told us that some 40% of the oil workers in the north of the province around Fort McMurray are functionally illiterate: he described a crash programme in remedial literacy that his company had been obliged to mount. These are adults who may be able to read simple texts, such as those contained in tabloid newspapers, but are unable to read anything more complex, including the texts now required in their jobs, where operating manuals or safety instructions have become essential. A study on education just issued by the Canadian Economic Council paints a similar picture across Canada as a whole. The ability and inclination for reading more complex prose is, of course, exactly what literary education is fitted to provide, but which our schools are apparently failing to deliver.

This example suggests that there are direct, practical implications flowing from our failures in literary education. It suggests that whatever approaches and methods are being used must be seriously at fault. Northrop Frye placed this concern in a wider context. He said:

> Teaching literature is impossible; that is why it is difficult. Yet it must be tried, tried constantly and indefatigably, and placed at the centre of the whole educational process, for at every level the understanding of words is as urgent and crucial a necessity as it is on its lowest level of learning to read and write. (p. 84)

It seems to me that, despite Frye's wisdom, we have not conceptualized what the difficulties of teaching literature are, or not conceptualized them correctly. As a result, the social and cultural significance of literature, and the resources it has to offer for every individual who can read, are being destroyed each day in classrooms across North America. We are eroding a resource, in other words, that has been central to human society, whether in oral or written form, from the beginning of human history.

Later, I want to consider what some of the implications of this process might be. But first, let me show you what the teaching of literature looks like from the student's point of view. Most of the students whose words you will hear in a moment are, in fact, among those who somehow survived the system with their interest in literature intact: they are now senior students in English courses at the University of Alberta; two of them are planning to become teachers of English themselves. At the same time, their experiences appear to be only too common. I have organized a few of their comments under headings that seem to me to encapsulate some of the standard problems to be found in literature classrooms, whether at school or at university.

2. Inside the classroom

2.1 Which would you prefer: A visit to the dentist, or doing some poetry?

There are strong reasons for believing that an enjoyment of poetry is one of our earliest faculties. Studies such as Ruth Weir's *Language in the Crib* (1962) suggest, indeed, that it is connate with the acquisition of language itself. Weir, who studied a child of two and a half, showed that the basic linguistic elements of poetry, such as alliteration, simile, the play with meaning, are spontaneously generated by the young child. An early appreciation of rhymes, riddles, the sense in nonsense of Edward Lear or Dr Seuss, quickly develops out of this innate poetic consciousness. We do not have to teach children to appreciate poetry at this level, and good teaching in the elementary grades can sometimes nurture remarkable poetic writing on the part of young children.

Then why should we expect this ability for poetry to have disappeared by high school? Yet that is the view many teachers seem to hold. They consider the study of poetry to be a quite alien and artificial exercise, one to be got through as quickly as possible. Here is one student's complaint about this:

> I wish they wouldn't approach poetry like it's something you were going to hate. It's almost like they tell you: Oh I know, you're going to hate this, but we've got to do it, it's only going to be three weeks. And so many people have said that, so I don't think it can be just my high school. You're sort of telling them: this is not to be liked, but bear with us, it'll soon be over.

If this student is echoing her teachers accurately, then it seems that doing poetry in school is about as interesting as having a tooth extracted: painful and unpleasant, and you can't wait for it to be over.

Why is it so unpleasant? Another student told me what kind of activities he saw (this was a memory of a Grade 8 class):

> We did an Edgar Allan Poe poem: we did "The Raven." I can't remember specifically what she [the teacher] did with it. She was very much into getting us to look for specific examples of literary devices, like symbolism, and irony, etc. She got us to go through the poem looking for all these different things, alliteration, simile, metaphor, this sort of thing. We did a lot of picking out of things like that, with that and other poems.

But, he added, these features of poetic diction were not then related to the rest of the

poem, nor was the meaning of the poem as a whole discussed.

> That was what was lacking, I thought. She was just making sure that we knew the terms, lots of terms. There are lots of literary devices, and she wanted to make sure we knew them all.

Although the teacher didn't explain why the students had to do this, the student said:

> But you can see in a sense why she was doing it, because she's got a final exam, and she can whack on a load of words and ask you to define them. It's probably stuff in the curriculum that she has to teach, so she socks it to you, and that's it.

So that poetry, the literary form with the deepest roots in our first experiences of language, is here destroyed for the student; its dismembered parts are thrown, like so much else, into the jaws of an examination system hungry for materials.

2.2 Mystified, Mistrusted, Mistreated

If the parts of poetry are made meaningless for the student, so too is much else about the literary texts they are assigned for study. I call these next three aspects the three *mists*, because they seem to belong together in making the real subject of literature quite opaque to the student, who is thus doomed to wander through a landscape he cannot see, not sure what pitfalls await, or what might loom out of the landscape to savage or harass him.

For example, a common feature of many English classes is regular testing. One student characterized her experience in Grade 12 as "a mathematics approach to literature, with quizzes and so on." This student, and several others, showed how Shakespeare was made consistently meaningless by a focus on low level and mechanical aspects of the study. The students would be assigned a scene to study; the scene was then read aloud in class. After this, she said,

> we would have a few quizzes, reading quizzes. That's what annoyed me. It was almost, you know, like what is the name of Hamlet's father. Well, that's not important! There was always more of an emphasis on that kind of thing. . . . I thought there wasn't enough discussion of the language, or the ideas behind it. And I don't think the ideas are so strange that a 17-year old can't grasp them.

Another student, herself a prospective English teacher who has already done practice teaching, said that her experience of studying Shakespeare consisted of looking at the meaning of single words, reading a scene aloud in class, listening to a recording, and memorizing ten or a dozen lines. Then, she said,

> At the end you would watch the movie. You always watched the movie at the end, I think, because they thought that if you watched the movie you're not going to bother reading it, and then you can cheat on the exam, because you've already seen the movie. Well, to me, we're not there to try to trick kids, so that they fail on exams. We're there to help them enjoy Shakespeare. So that if they were even to have started with the movie, and gave them some kind of an understanding, so that when they got to the scene, a

> particular scene, they knew what the hell was actually going on. Whereas most of the time they didn't, and even me, who liked it, lots of times I was completely in the dark as well. For me Shakespeare was really interesting, I really enjoyed it. But for most people in the class, pure torture. I mean, you go into any class, and if you have to teach Shakespeare, the minute that word comes out of your mouth, they're groaning and moaning, and rolling on the floor.

2.3 The invisible ink syndrome

Those students who, by high school, are still thinking about the meaning of the literary texts they read, are often confronted by the teacher who either tells them what the correct meaning of a text is, or, more grotesquely, engages them in a complex guessing game in which they have to discover the meaning that is in the teacher's mind (Susan Hynds, 1991, p. 119, makes a similar complaint). The fallacy of the single right meaning, of course, has a chilling effect on discussion in the class:

> I've had some profs where students are totally intimidated about saying anything in class, because the prof has certain ideas, and if you stray anywhere off those you're in big trouble. I don't believe in a teacher standing up in front of a class and saying: Now this is what Shakespeare meant by this line. And there's a lot of that done, a lot of it.

One student expressed this problem eloquently:

> Students feel the pressure of having to get the right answer, and I don't think that's possible in literature. There isn't one right answer. God hasn't put the right answer in invisible ink in every book! Find that little bit of writing, shine the ultra-violet light on it, and you'll see! That's not the way it works. Many instructors I've had seem to work that way, that there's one right answer. So what happens to the student who never seems to get that answer? They end up really not liking English.

2.4 Let me tell you how to do the personal response

An error of a quite different kind is made by teachers who set the "personal response" to a text, either because they have heard that this is an appropriate learning activity, or because the new-look curriculum coming out of the education board requires it at examination. Unable to conceptualize how a response could be personal and still be authorized, the teacher ends up instructing students in how to write one. In this way it becomes just another classroom exercise, disconnected from its intended meaning. For example, one student told me:

> We did practice in how to do personal responses, but that was never applied, it was never made clear to me why we were doing it, what relation this had to English. And I didn't realize it until afterwards . . . when I started talking to people.

And in his high school classroom, he added, the personal response was

> not *valued* at all. It was there because it had to be there, and it wasn't connected, it wasn't made anything of, it was just there. It was separate, a

separate item, the personal response.

2.5 The toxic classroom, or, the Chernobyl effect

Little wonder, then, that many students, subjected to a series of arbitrary, mystifying, and unpleasant activities in English classes, emerge from their high schools with a deep and lasting disgust towards literature. The classroom has poisoned their disposition for literature, and only the most determined survive, as this student reports:

> I have always had a predisposition towards English, it's always been my love. I read as a kid, and I've always grown up with it. But I can honestly say that I hated English in high school, and I hated it even worse in junior high, and the only reason I got through, I think, was because I had that initial love of it. But for the people in my classrooms, to go to English class was pure torture for them.

Here is another student, who summed up her experience of English in this way:

> Most of my closest friends, none of them are in English, they all hated it. They all say, I can't do it, I hate it. That's the attitude you get coming out of high school -- people come out of it saying they can't stand English, and I think that has a lot to do with the way it's taught. They're force fed. *I* was force fed!

The result is so long lasting, and has such pervasive side-effects, that it might be appropriate to call it the Chernobyl effect. While the students concerned can, as it were, flee the direct impact of the radioactive cloud once they leave high school, they cannot escape the long-term consequences of the fall out -- the dust of strontium and caesium particles that settles in the ground where they live, poisoning the air and water, the food they eat. Such an adult, I would suggest, is more likely to fall victim to the rhetorics of politics or business, unable to tell the genuine from the merely plausible; more likely to have recourse to the distractions of Hollywood or the television; more willing to collude in the debasement of literature and the other arts now being practiced daily in the media, particularly by the advertising industry.

I have dramatized the problems of literary education in order to focus on the distress that I hear, as I listen to one student after another report what has happened to them, whether in school or university. In reality, it is hard to know how seriously we should consider the outcome of such poor classroom methods. Unlike the effects of smoking, or Aids, or the infant mortality rate, the consequences of excluding a generation of adults from participation in literature are subtle and invisible, yet the personal and social costs may prove to be just as significant. They almost certainly include that 40% functional illiteracy rate at Fort McMurray.

In the last part of the paper, I will consider some of the ways in which we might reconstrue the process of literary education, drawing in part upon evidence from our reader response studies at Alberta. At the same time, this will raise some questions about what the purpose of reading literature might be.

3. Empowering the reader

> The end of criticism and teaching . . . is not an aesthetic but an ethical and participating end: for it, ultimately, works of literature are not things to be contemplated but powers to be absorbed. (Frye, 1970, p. 82)

Frye's position in this essay, from which I have been quoting, is based on the distinction between knowledge *of* things, and knowledge *about* things. This is, as he points out, a venerable distinction going back certainly as far as Plato (p. 74). Knowledge *of* things is lived, existential knowledge; it has become a part of our identity, a source of our power. However, teachers of literature cannot communicate this power directly; they can only convey knowledge *about* literature. The experience of reading is subjective, and in itself incommunicable.

There are, of course, a number of different ways to read a literary text, as Rosenblatt (1978) or Vipond and Hunt (1984) point out. We can read a text to find some information, or to pick out all the similes, or to develop our vocabulary. It seems that functional reading of this kind was what mainly occupied the time of the students from whom I have quoted. To read a text as literature, however, is a rather different activity. The engagement with literature begins in the reader's direct, imaginal and emotional response to a text. Unfortunately, this response is the easiest to derail in the classroom; it is the most vulnerable to the authority of a teacher's assertions, and it is quickly effaced by the requirements of some specific activity or a test. Too many teachers seem not to trust students to respond; it is as though they cannot believe in the direct, existential knowledge of literature, of which Frye speaks. But the basis of an effective literary education lies in nurturing that response, in developing and empowering it. The classroom must become a place where that response is both respected and made the basis for a range of appropriate activities. The teacher will deploy a series of primarily inductive methods that enable students to explore and develop their responses, to share them and modify them, and eventually to make them authoritative.

The methods used can often be modelled upon the reading process itself, as far as we have been able to understand it. Thus some indicators for the development of appropriate methods can be gained from empirical studies of literary response. I will mention three specific aspects that seem important in this context: first, the individual nature of response; second, the sensitivity of most readers to stylistic features; and third, the constructive role played by feelings.

As the student who complained of the invisible ink implied, the single right reading of a literary text is a myth. As a hangover from the days of New Criticism, this myth undervalues the multiple perspectives and planes of meaning possible even within the focus of a single reader. Its successor, Fish's notion of an interpretive community that constrains readers, is perhaps also as much a myth in its turn. Actual readers, as we have found, vary considerably in the meanings they will attribute to the same text. At the opening of a short story that we have studied, for example, a description of a garden for one reader evoked a sense of evil and foreboding, for another a sense of nostalgia for home, and for a third a pleasing, fairy tale atmosphere. It was possible to see how each of these responses then disposed the readers to develop quite different, and equally productive, views of what the story "meant." I would suggest that the investment that we make in this way as readers in our own readings seems to allow a literary text to speak to what is most personal or individual within us. The individuality of our readings, therefore, is neither incidental nor a side effect of reading; it is central to our

experience of literature.

Second, the points at which readers begin to develop their sense of meaning often seem related to the stylistic high points, or foregrounding, that they encounter in a text. In this respect, readers' appreciation of such linguistic features as alliteration, ellipsis, or metaphor, seems to play a functional and constructive role. In a recent study (Miall and Kuiken, 1994) we produced an *a priori* measure of foregrounding for the segments of a short story (a segment usually consisted of one sentence). We found that this measure was predictive both of the time that readers would spend on each segment during normal reading (the more foregrounding the more reading was slowed down), and how much feeling readers attributed to each segment, as judged by a rating task. In another study (Miall, 1990) we also found that readers tended to relate the same segments across a text, suggesting that foregrounding plays an important role in enabling readers to build a network of relationships between different points in a story or poem. So, while readers may individually find quite different meanings in the foregrounded passages within a text, there are important commonalities in how a text tends to structure and guide the meanings that readers attribute to it.

The third important aspect of the empirical studies we have done -- and this seems to be implicit in Frye's notion of empowerment -- is the finding that emotional aspects of response play a central part (Miall, 1988, 1989). When we ask readers to report to us in various ways on their feelings while reading, a complex picture begins to emerge of the range of functions that feelings perform. In particular, the constructive aspects of response, during the moment by moment processes of literary reading, appear to be due primarily to several properties of feeling. Feelings provide a resource at moments of defamiliarization, when automatic response is blocked, such as the moment when some significant foregrounded feature is encountered. Here feeling draws in the experience and concerns of the reader, enabling preliminary interpretive concepts to be applied to the local details of the text. Feelings also enable readers to track the relationship between the local details of a text and their sense of the text as a whole. Feeling here seems to act in an anticipatory manner: the reader is checking and adjusting each particular idea in line with what is appropriate emotionally or that resonates with the projected emotional colours of the outcome. These are some of the functional aspects of emotion in literary response that we have found from empirical study.

One further aspect of emotion also seems important to literary response, although it is one for which we have no empirical support as yet. A given emotion seems essentially plot-like: it endows our experience of the moment with a narrative frame, arising from the ongoing drama in which we are cast as individuals. One characteristic of positive emotions, for example, is that we are cast as the protagonist in the plot: we take an active role, as in love or curiosity. In negative emotions, by contrast, we are more usually reactive. Here we find ourselves cast in the antagonist's role, as in fear or grief. An emotion also contains temporal implications, in that it moves us towards or away from something, or attempts to do so; it implies a yet to be realized state of the self, which we either welcome or try to avoid. Thus an emotion almost always has an anticipatory aspect, even those like nostalgia or despair, which seem to refer primarily to the past. Like all good plots, moreover, an emotion also has a theme: this refers to the aims or objects of the self which are currently being furthered or put in jeopardy, which the emotion monitors and to which it alerts us. Finally, emotion, as de Sousa (1987) has pointed out, helps create a context: it promotes the salience of certain aspects and limits or negates others; thus the "plot" of a given emotion brings into its orbit only those materials that are relevant to its working out.

While a literary text invokes our emotional plots, however, one of the functions of literature appears to be to offer us the chance to reconfigure them: a literary text may challenge or transform our readily instantiated, self-referential plots. Thus the meaning of a given emotion may be placed in a different perspective; it may be modified, subjected to redefinition by confrontation with another emotion. Given that our emotions are perhaps largely the product of our culture and our specific social experiences, literature may enable readers to become more conscious and more critical of the emotions they feel. In this way, through the emotions we bring to it, literature develops and reshapes the themes of the self.

The emotions felt in the classroom by the students I have quoted seem too often to have been anger, frustration, disappointment, or boredom. But such emotions were induced by the teaching methods, not by the literary texts they were being asked to read. An appropriate method must allow the student reader to respond to texts at the level of feelings and imagery, to register the meaning of those responses for the self, and to explore the implications of such feelings as they work towards their own, individual interpretations of texts. From empirical study we now understand several important aspects of the reading process: that readers are generally sensitive to foregrounding, that emotion plays a constructive role, and that many different individual readings of a given text are possible.

These three aspects of response help to suggest more appropriate activities for the classroom, activities that respect the subjective and individually variable nature of response. Given a new text, such as a poem, students might start by being asked to notice the most immediately striking aspects of the text: what, for them, stands out, seems interesting or puzzling, or feels different. A class of students undertaking this task will pick out much of the foregrounding in the text, even though they may not recognize what specific features they are responding to, such as alliteration, or a metaphor. Secondly, students can be set to examine how the features they have noticed repeat, contrast, or otherwise relate; they can begin to articulate how the text seems to divide into larger sections, and how the sections as a whole might be characterized. So far, then, students will have picked out significant foregrounding, and begun to build a sense of the form of the text. Both these activities are enhanced by putting students together in small groups where they can compare their findings and discuss agreements and disagreements; at this stage, students often learn more from each other than they would from the instructor.

Once these stages have been completed, however, students will have a preliminary sense of what the text means to them; they will probably also have a series of questions and problems. At this point they can try to put their questions in a form that will provide some directions for the class as a whole. These questions are, of course, students' questions, not the questions of the teacher or questions out of the back of the anthology, which generally work to devalue or paralyse students' own inquiries. It should be noted that neither Hynds (1991) nor Nystrand (1991) wishes to relinquish teacher's questions; they would make them more authentic -- but this still gives the teacher's agenda the dominant role in the classroom. In the classroom I am describing the teacher does perform several important functions: she can help in pointing out similarities between students' questions or reshape questions to make them more likely to prove productive; she can suggest resources and methods for beginning to answer the questions. Some questions may be answered most effectively by a lecture from the teacher; others may require work in the library; others again may be suitable for further work on the part of students in groups in the classroom, where they can call in the teacher for consultation

as necessary. When students have completed an important sequence of work, they can be invited to report to the class in one of several possible ways: orally, with poster-type displays, dramatic presentations, or written reports.

Once a class of students has become used to working in such ways, taking responsibility for responding to texts and examining them methodically, and reporting their findings in ways that are useful to the class as a whole, a teacher can, of course, take a more pro-active role from time to time. She can herself suggest questions that would be worth exploring; she can draw attention to perspectives that may not be readily discovered by the students in the class; she can play a significant part in relating, summarizing, and contextualizing the issues that the students produce for discussion. The initiative for managing their learning, however, has begun with the students themselves, and should remain with them. The classroom must provide a context in which students can explore their own responses to literature, share them with others and develop them, without fear of being ridiculed, told they are wrong, or required to engage in irrelevant or distracting activities that belittle their understanding and feelings.

4. Speculative conclusions

Negative emotions of the wrong kind, as I have tried to show, seem only too common in the literature classroom. But I want to draw attention to what I see as a relevant, and important role for negative emotions in response to literature. I have always found it striking that literature dwells so often especially on the negative aspects of life. Aristotle's theory of catharsis is, of course, one important account of why we are drawn to watch a tragic play such as *Oedipus Rex*. But I wonder whether a theory of this kind is not required in order to explain a much wider range of literary response. Perhaps a part of the function of literature is to arouse our negative emotions. It is obvious that the negative emotions we feel in everyday life are much more likely to be suppressed than the positive; they are socially less acceptable, and to express them might result in socially disruptive or damaging consequences. In enabling us to experience negative emotions during reading, however, literature induces us to reflect on the nature of such emotions, to explore their implications, and perhaps to rethink them in productive ways, within a symbolic context that is at one remove from the actual world. I would surmise that literature is a medium that human societies have developed to alleviate the necessary constraints of social living. If so, we can see that in this respect literature has an evolutionary rationale. If we thwart this process by clumsy methods in the literature classroom, perhaps we do so at our peril; I see no obvious or ready replacement for it in our present culture.

The reading of literature may thus play an important part in developing the self of the reader: more particularly, it provides a context in which the reader's own experience can be reassessed through constructive reformulation of the meaning and scope of the emotions. Responding to literature can be seen as a part of the adaptive system which humans have, so far rather successfully, devised to sustain themselves. Our classroom methods for teaching literature must be designed to facilitate rather than obstruct this process. The emotions of response are too easily thwarted by the demands of teachers for answers to questions, by inappropriate methods, or by the misuse of literature for testing and other goals. Teaching of this kind fails to speak to the experience of literature that is central to the student.

One might wonder, in conclusion, given our predisposition in childhood both to generate and appreciate elementary forms of literature, why we require a literary

education at all. Would this capacity not simply continue to develop and mature, left to itself, enabling all of us to enjoy Shakespeare, Wordsworth, or James Joyce as adults? In a culture with fewer technological distractions, I suspect this is what would happen, and probably has happened at times: for example, in Elizabethan England, or more recently in modern Russia. Now we have to facilitate, or induce, by educational means, a responsiveness to literature that in a different kind of culture would need no such aid. But there are other gains to be made, provided our methods are appropriate: as educators we can give readers the means to be more aware of the source of their responses in their own experience; we can provide a vocabulary with which to share interpretations; we can provide readers with points of entry to the debate about the place and significance of literature in which we are all engaged as members of our culture, whether in cafés, newspapers, or on television.

Meanwhile, however, as the students I interviewed made clear, we may have done more to negate than to facilitate the power of literature in society by its institutionalized treatment in schools. Yet where should students look for complex and productive thought about our culture if not to literature? Should they look to the cinema, or to television, or to the debates of politicians? It seems that, as teachers, we have lost confidence in the ability of students to be engaged by the great issues in which our literature would involve us. Yet, as Shelley put it in the *Defence*, poetry is "The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution" (Shelley, 1840/1988, p. 297). Let us empower our students as readers of literature, and perhaps, once again, literature will become the power for social change that Shelley believed it to be.

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