

Imaginative Response: Teaching Literature through Creative Writing

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The Genesis of Imaginative Response

It would come as little surprise to our students to say that studying literature invariably involves some kind of writing on their part, accustomed as they are, like us, to instruction that couples reading and discussion with written response. Such writing may take a number of shapes, yet arguably gravitates toward one of two poles: formal analytic essays and informal personal response. Both, of course, have their purposes when interpreting works in the classroom. Yet, as many teachers have come to realize, a full spectrum of student writing

can readily include a host of imaginative genres as well. In fact, recent attention to multigenre alternatives to conventional research papers routinely assigned in high schools suggests a growing interest in imaginative or “creative” student writing. Indeed, many innovative teachers have experimented with new ways of introducing imaginative writing. In this article I examine the place such creative writing might logically take in the study of literature. I contend that rather than supplanting conventional literary criticism in the classroom, such writing—what I term *imaginative response*—can readily complement and ultimately enrich formal analysis.

Before examining imaginative response, let me explain how I became interested in this approach—as a student, teacher, writer, and, most recently, researcher. As an undergraduate in college, I enrolled in English classes as a non-major. Senior year, with electives to spare, I became interested in learning about journal writing. It seemed that “real writers,” published authors, often indulged in such forms. As it happened, I was about to embark on a cross-continental bicycle odyssey and hoped to capture that experience on the page. So I enrolled in two classes requiring extensive journal writing: one a literature course, the other a creative writing work-

shop, offered concurrently by the same professor. What I discovered was the natural symbiosis of “reading as a writer.” Reading informed my writing; writing informed my reading. From a student perspective, this was no small epiphany. What’s more, it turned me from a business major into a lifelong student, and, ultimately, a teacher of English.

Several years ago, on the English faculty of a smaller university, I had the opportunity to teach a wide range of classes, including literature and creative writing in addition to composition. One was a lower division genre course, Introduction to Poetry, and was populated primarily by non-majors. I took it as my mission to make the class as interesting as possible for the majority of students, regardless of their initial attitudes. (Most students took such courses merely to satisfy degree requirements.) Consequently, as in many classrooms, the level of interest varied dramatically. In such a setting, I believe choice to be essential. Given my own undergraduate experience, I decided to emphasize student writing as well. I chose an anthology, *Discovering Poetry*, edited by Hans Guth and Gabriel Rico, for both its inclusiveness and its excellent selections. Poems by those writers I already knew well seemed particularly apt choices. However, there was

another unexpected dividend. In each chapter were writing prompts of three kinds: expository, narrative, and verse—all *in response* to poems. I asked my students to choose and complete three prompts—one of each kind—every week, and when submitting the set, to single out one for my comments and a grade. Gradually—and then increasingly—students asked for response week after week to their original poems. I wondered why.

Certainly their interest in creative writing in response to the poems they were reading seems perfectly reasonable to me. After all, having written and published poems for over twenty years myself, I often rely on a similar approach, sitting down to read others' work first, until an idea for writing comes to mind: reading as a writer. Whether in response to an image, a phrase, a topic, or a memory, reading can readily inspire original work. Many students, it seemed, enjoyed this process, too. Working now as an English educator, I have found that preservice teachers unaccustomed to creative writing—and a bit timid about it initially—ultimately find devising and fulfilling such assignments quite inspiring.

Having seen this reading-writing connection in imaginative genres work so well as a student, teacher, and writer, I return to it now as a researcher, interested in the benefits of such an approach for high school students.

A Rationale

When addressed in high school at all, “creative writing” is too often relegated to single instructional units or, at best, stand-alone elective classes. In its place, “school-sponsored” writing, as researchers such as James Moffett and James Britton have repeatedly suggested, has too often gravitated toward an unnecessarily narrow subset of the many possible purposes, audiences, and, importantly, textual types. Similarly, in *Textual Power* Robert Scholes argues against the double-standard prevalent in our schools that assigns reading fiction and poetry as “literature,” yet requires students to write primarily exposition throughout their high school years.

How has this situation come about? English teachers typically have been prepared in programs that place a premium on a single, specialized form of prose, the critical analysis essay, to the exclusion of imaginative genres and creative writing. Naturally that imbalance has been replicated in many secondary classrooms. Even though creative writing can

provide an ideal vehicle for responding to literature in personally meaningful ways, most high school students all too rarely have the chance to write imaginatively. Of course, this does not need to be so.

The alternative, I believe, is to make writing in a variety of imaginative genres an integral part of teaching literature. Reading and writing in various forms can and *should* go hand-in-hand. Why not couple studying literary works with student writing in parallel forms more often? Adding writing in non-expository and “literary” forms to secondary literature study constitutes a natural and timely move within the discipline. Teaching literature in concert with writing in a variety of genres reflects several major trends in the field, including the long-standing emphasis on reader response theory. Reader response underlies many common instructional strategies such as informal reading and response journals. Indeed, allowing students to express original responses in a wide variety of genres ultimately gives more of them, not only those adept at analytic prose, a personally meaningful way to engage with literature.

Toward a Theory of Imaginative Response

Imaginative response can be defined broadly as responding to a piece of literature by writing creatively in any imaginative genre other than exposition and argument. Integrating imaginative response does not necessitate displacing the aims of traditional literary analysis, however. On the contrary, by guiding students to explore a work in specific ways, teachers can support interpretation and criticism. As such, imaginative response provides an instructional strategy that ultimately contributes to more insightful formal analysis.

Writing imaginatively in response to literary works engages students with a text, enriches their appreciation, and yields valuable insights into interpreting the work. A natural consequence of imaginative response appears to be close and, importantly, *focused* rereading. Many students report repeatedly consulting the text as they compose imaginative responses so that their writing is detailed and faithful to the original. Accordingly, after students have explored a work imaginatively, their interpretations are often considerably more thoughtful and complex.

Imaginative response to literature can be used to achieve particular interpretive aims such as probing a particular character's point of view, for example. Prompts can be shaped to ensure that writing

creatively directly complements specific aspects of traditional literary analysis, contributing to textual interpretation in meaningful ways. Moreover, writing reflectively afterward, students can bridge from the creative to the interpretive, articulating insights into a work arrived at while writing imaginatively.

Overall, imaginative response is a timely addition to our repertoire of literature teaching—one that fits well with other current instructional practices. Writing imaginatively readily complements other forms of creativity in the literature classroom and can enrich how we teach literature, eliciting genuinely original student writing in place of expository papers that are too often similar—and limited—in form and focus. Imaginative response ultimately stands to enhance classroom literary study in natural and appropriate ways. In place of a simple opposition between personal response and formal analysis, imaginative response maps a continuum between the two and demonstrates how they can serve essentially complementary roles when interpreting literary works.

Voice in Imaginative Response

When fashioning imaginative response assignments, voice is one of several rhetorical “variables.” Voice in this context refers to the identity of the “speaker” in student writing, what is variously termed *persona*, *perspective*, *point of view*, etc. in narrative and rhetorical theory. Writing in a character’s voice, for example, invites student readers to explore a work from perspectives situated within a text.

When assuming “textual voices,” imaginative writing provides students with a variety of vantage points from which to examine and interpret a work. In addition to the voices of individual characters, major or minor, other voices can also be derived from a literary work: those that are explicitly present in the text such as narrators, and those that might be thought of as implicit such as a hypothetical news reporter, who could reasonably be imagined to exist within the world of the work. Alternatively, student writers can also contemplate and give voice to perspectives that are silenced by a text. While students might sometimes choose to write in the voices of personal interest, imaginative response assignments can also direct them to write from those particularly valuable to interpretation. Considering such textually-based perspectives often involves examining the language of a work more closely and in greater depth.

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Exploring the language of a literary text—and its constituent *voices*—is a natural aspect of interpretation. When students discuss literary works in class, as I explore in *Voicing Ourselves*, they necessarily refer to the perspectives of others, including authors and narrators as well as characters. Consider the place of paraphrase in traditional literary study. In classroom conversation, such attribution often takes the form of informal, interpretive paraphrase, representing what others have written or said. Such attribution—or *voicing*—appears to be an inevitable, even necessary, aspect of negotiating the interpretation of literature in the classroom. Indeed, beyond establishing textual detail, such voicing allows students to articulate and interact with a variety of perspectives encountered in a work. Similarly, *writing* in textual voices provides a vehicle for engaging imaginatively with the “inner lives” of characters, as well as relationships among them. Writing in the voices of others requires a kind of empathy, of course, and must be handled respectfully, avoiding clichés, stereotypes, and prejudice, especially when assuming voices of others whose social identity or cultural background differs from one’s own. In the process, students interact with a text and can examine the degree to which they “identify” with particular characters. While there are admittedly limits to such textual empathy, considering deeply the experiences, emotions, and perspectives of others is central to appreciating literature, and arguably to its interpretation and analysis.

Genres of Imaginative Response

Choice of genres for student writing, of course, is at the heart of imaginative response—and another rhetorical “variable” to consider when fashioning

such assignments. When it comes to student writing in response to literature, critics of entrenched practices such as Scholes in *Textual Power* and Mofett in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* have long railed against the “double standard” that limits students of literature to writing analytic exposition, effectively eclipsing the richness of other textual types. What if students were invited to write in a wide variety of genres instead? Logically, a teacher might begin with the familiar concept of dependent authorship, by writing in “like genre” to expand an existing work by adding epilogues, prologues, interchapters, alternate endings, and so forth. Beyond inviting students to add onto an existing literary text by writing in the same genre, response prompts can in principle incorporate any number of *other* imaginative genres as well.

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More inclusive still is the use of multigenre response; that is, writing several imaginative pieces in a number of genres in response to a single literary work. The underlying principle is to provide students with variety and choice while fostering creativity. Multigenre imaginative response projects can readily couple private and public forms to explore a single literary work in a variety of ways. Accordingly, responding imaginatively provides students with additional benefits as developing writers, including, of course, practice composing in a wide variety of forms.

Audience in Imaginative Response

Audience is yet another “rhetorical variable” to consider when constructing prompts for imaginative response assignments. Rather than referring to actual classroom readership (i.e., teachers and classmates), audience refers here to fictive or hypothetical addressees—what in narrative and response theory have been termed *implied readers*. In the context of imaginative response, of course, those “addressed” by student writing conceivably include figures in-

scribed in the literary text itself (e.g., authors, narrators, characters, etc.). Student writing can likewise address figures within the world of the work not expressly present in the text: the hypothetical relative of an “actual” character, for example. Accordingly, a range of social relationships can be evoked when writing imaginatively, including those that contribute most directly to its interpretation.

Writing in schools has conventionally gravitated toward a relatively narrow range of forms. This has also been true of audience, but need not be so, especially in the case of response to literature, where the works themselves suggest so many possibilities. Private or personal writing, such as epistolary exchanges among characters, can prescribe a highly specific audience. Public writing, such as journalistic forms, might also address an audience within the world of the work. For example, if a story raised questions about the censorship of art, students might be asked to write a series of letters to the editor—that is, addressing a *fictional* public readership. (In terms of voice, they might be written from the contrasting perspectives of several characters.) In this way, imaginative response can illuminate a work’s social and political implications.

Responding to Literature in Imaginative Genres

Responding by Writing Narrative

Narrative works, as Arthur Applebee has reported in several large-scale national surveys, have long held a privileged place in middle and secondary school literature curricula. Ironically, narrative writing by students themselves, as Scholes argues, has been largely neglected as a legitimate form of response. Traditionally, student narrative has had a relatively narrowly defined role in literary studies, typically assigned restricted functions such as plot summary. While reader response approaches sometimes invite narrative, students typically write about personal experience—that is, memories inspired by reading—rather than interacting with a literary work *through* narrative. Missing is the systematic use of story for exploring literary works such as extensions of an existing narrative, sometimes termed *dependent authorship*. Indeed, writing in like genre is perhaps the most nearly self-evident application of narrative response. Writing narrative is equally valuable, however, for interacting with literary works of other

genres. Despite its apparent versatility, however, narrative is not without limitations as a form of imaginative response. For example, while it is often effective for addressing narrative poems, it can be less well suited to highly introspective or personal verse. On the other hand, narrative provides a natural accoutrement to drama, since they conventionally represent events chronologically in similar ways and are both composed of multiple voices.

Clearly, narrative has long been utilized in literary studies for representing chronology within works and establishing a sequence of events. The potential of narrative as a form for response—and textual exploration—only begins with such recounting, of course, since plot summary fails to explore point of view. Narrative is especially well suited to considering a story from alternative perspectives such as retelling in the voices of various characters who might be called upon to narrate. This has conventionally been referred to as *point of view*, or what narratologists such as Gerard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* have described as *focalization*. Narrative is inherently multivocal—incorporating dialogue among characters. Imaginative response can capitalize on this very aspect of narrative—introducing an interpretive element precisely because it entails a narrator’s point of view. Choice of narrator is where student narrative intersects with voice. When student writers assume characters’ voices, they must both read and “speak” from a specific textual perspective, ideally one that requires viewing the work anew, rereading the work, so to speak, *reinterpreting it from within*. Part of the power of narrative for interpretation, then, is the way that each retelling is situated by choice of narrator—how a character’s stake in events changes his or her potential significance.

Student writers find narrative a natural and accessible form for imaginative response—yet one that challenges them to engage texts in greater depth and from previously unexamined perspectives. Such direct engagement with literary works is a hallmark of imaginative response.

Responding by Writing Poetry

Inviting students to write poetry in response to literature opens new avenues for both student writing and textual interpretation, whether writing in like genre, extending an existing text, or responding to a poem with a poem. Written in response to genres other than poetry such as fiction and drama, student

poetry assuming the voices of characters can serve as an interpretive tool. Much like interior monologue, poetry allows for extended reflection on the “inner lives,” whether that of characters within the world of a work or the contemplation of student readers themselves.

More structured interpretive exercises can also engage students in crafting poems: fashioning “found poems,” for instance, from brief excerpts from prose texts; or arranging poetic “montages” of favorite lines and phrases. Overall, by relaxing sentence syntax and other prose conventions such as punctuation, poetry frees students to focus on compression of language and thought as well as heightened attention to sound—in service of exploring a work. Such selective echoing of the original text clearly encourages close reading.

Responding by Writing Drama

Drama, alongside fiction and poetry, rounds out the conventional trilogy of “literary” genres. As such, it has a clearly established place in curriculum and classroom, and in the study of both literature and creative writing. Given its textual conventions—including reliance on *oral* language—drama provides a unique vehicle for imaginative response. Again, writing in like genre (drama in response to drama) offers a starting point. Students might be assigned to write an extension of the existing text (such as additional scenes), a form of dependent authorship. A variation on drama as “high culture” is writing scripts of other types, including those associated with “popular culture” such as television programs of various kinds, without necessarily sacrificing complexity. Such popular forms do provide several marked advantages—among them student familiarity with genre conventions, as well as classroom-appropriate use of contemporary language and diction. In fact, such exercises asking students to write an updated version of a canonical dramatic text are arguably an act of interpretation.

Students might also respond to other genres, such as narrative, by writing drama. In fact, drama and narrative mesh especially well, due, in part, to shared characteristics. Recasting passages of prose fiction as dramatic scripts allows student writers to engage the text in direct and original ways. Beyond representing existing dialogue, student writers are in a position to author language that both echoes and *interprets* the original text. Another advantage of drama as imaginative response is the

possibility of informally *performing* completed scripts in the classroom—as well as discussing them in terms of interpretation. Finally, as with other genres, once students have written imaginatively, writing reflectively can allow them to harness insights for formal interpretation.

Responding by Writing “Non-Literary” Genres

Prose genres for student writing in response to literature are perhaps the most various. While a conventional view has regarded nonfiction as “non-literary” generally, for several decades scholars such as Ross Winterowd in *The Rhetoric of the Other Literature* have sought to restore the contemporary narrative essay to “literary” status. Nonetheless, for the purposes of imaginative response, prose of many kinds proves perfectly suitable for student writing; that is, prose defined broadly, running the gamut from private to public, and thereby providing numerous and varied avenues for examining, exploring, and extending literary texts. “Private” can be defined as writing intended for its author alone to see, or singular, confidential addressees, and includes such commonplace forms as letters, diaries, and journals. Each can be written in whatever voices are supported by the literary text under study, ideally those most likely to enhance its interpretation. Such “non-literary” genres are especially well suited to examining character development and point of view, or, in the case of epistolary exchanges, relationships among characters.

Public writing, on the other hand, encompasses practical and popular prose forms. Such public prose would be addressed to a general audience (e.g., dictionary definitions, capsule biographies, encyclopedia entries, various journalistic forms). A letter to the editor regarding controversial issues or socially significant themes raised by a work is an example of a “practical” as opposed to “literary” form of prose that can contribute to interpretation. A series of several letters in different voices can explore multiple perspectives.

The value of student creative writing to the study of literature is a function of how well it enables students to interact meaningfully with a literary work: that is, whether it enhances overall appreciation and ultimately contributes to interpretation. Careful choice of voice and audience, of course, can help ensure that resulting student writing is grounded in the text, yet genuinely imagina-

tive. Perhaps it is precisely because there are so many varieties or subgenres that prose provides such a versatile tool for imaginative response.

Responding by Writing in Multiple Genres

Multigenre assignments entail writing repeatedly in a variety of genres such as the alternatives to conventional, expository “research papers” Tom Romano has proposed in his books *Writing with Passion* and *Blending Genre, Altering Style*. In the case of imaginative response, students might write in several genres in relation to a single literary work. This approach can prove a powerful precursor to formal interpretation and analysis—one that my students have aptly described as *researching a work with the imagination*.

Multigenre imaginative response enlivens classroom discussion by revealing multiple perspectives in a text, ultimately adding depth and complexity to critical analysis. In fact, the multigenre approach seems to offer a number of important advantages: (1) engaging and motivating students through variety and choice; (2) appealing to students with a range of interests and abilities through the creativity of such assignments; (3) yielding original insights through rereading and responding to a work repeatedly; (4) making direct connections to textual interpretation through student reflection on their own imaginative writing; (5) enriching classroom discussions of literary works through the expression of multiple interpretations. Student writers report that responding in multiple genres adds depth to their understanding of literary works. Moreover, by choosing forms of imaginative response and writing creatively, students gain ownership over their writing and a heightened personal stake in classroom discussion and interpretation of a work.

Multigenre response also provides a vehicle for considering a single piece of literature from a variety of angles—including how others might be inclined to respond to the themes and issues raised by the work. A set of multigenre response prompts can juxtapose contrasting perspectives such as those of several specific characters in a work. After all, one hallmark of multigenre imaginative response is how it entails revisiting a work repeatedly, thereby adding “layers” to interpretation. Consequently, multigenre response assignments are typically more involved and time-consuming than writing traditional expository essays alone. For the teacher, this approach involves designing assignments revolving around

several prompts that require students to write a variety of responses. Accordingly, multigenre assignments are most often appropriate when completed over the course of an entire instructional unit for works to be studied in considerable depth.

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The Promise of Imaginative Response

The premise of this article is that imaginative response can be designed to systematically support textual interpretation of literary works in the classroom. What if critical analysis, long a dominant mode of interacting with literary works, were augmented—and supported—by imaginative response? In order to respond imaginatively, students report needing to read and reread literary works with a heightened degree of scrutiny. They acknowledge that imaginative response is often as complex and challenging as conventional analysis—if not more so. Indeed, they readily recognize the complexity of responding by creative writing—and its significance to interpreting the work as a whole—in stark contrast to answering narrow questions that emphasize isolated textual details, for example. As we have seen, moreover, imaginative response prompts can be designed to address specific types of interpretive questions.

As with other creative and expressive activities, students often profit by reflecting on what they have learned in the process, exploring insights into a work and its interpretation that arose while responding. Indeed, once such reflective writing becomes a staple in the classroom, it can seem a nearly indispensable tool for learning. Identifying and articulating them explicitly, however, is an acquired skill. Such “reflective” writing is essentially a genre deserving attention in its own right—one that can be used in conjunction with imaginative response in service of textual interpretation. The quality of such written re-

flection, however, hinges on a number of factors such as how it is defined and presented, whether credit is awarded, and whether such writing is shared with classmates. We should not assume that the value of reflection will always be self evident to students. It is essential to communicate to students the purposes and importance of reflective writing, as well as to provide guidance. For instance, prompts for reflection that specify expectations—as well as models of student writing—are clearly more likely to yield fruitful results. In the context of imaginative response, this strategy can help to ensure that connections to textual interpretation are recognized and developed.

Student creative writing in response to literature can and often does reveal complex interpretive insights. Reflection in turn provides an excellent means for exploring the interpretive insights gained while responding—*imaginatively*.

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