

Literature and the Web

Reading and Responding with New Technologies

*Robert Rozema
and Allen Webb*

Foreword by Sara B. Kajder

Heinemann
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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“The Book Report, Version 2.0: Podcasting on Young Adult Literature” by Robert Rozema was originally published in *English Journal*. Copyright © 2007 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.

“Falling Into Story: Teaching Reading with the Literary MOO” by Robert Rozema was originally published in *English Journal*. Copyright © 2003 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.

“Digital Texts and the New Literacies” by Allen Webb was originally published in *English Journal*. Copyright © 2007 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rozema, Robert.

Literature and the web : reading and responding with new technologies / Robert Rozema and Allen Webb ; foreword by Sara Kajder.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-325-02147-8

ISBN-10: 0-325-02147-3

1. English literature—Computer network resources. 2. English literature—Study and teaching—Aids and devices. 3. Literature—Study and teaching—Aids and devices. I. Webb, Allen. II. Title.

PR35.R69 2008

820.78'54678—dc22

2008010179

Editor: James Strickland

Production editor: Sonja S. Chapman

Cover design: Jenny Jensen Greenleaf

Cover photo courtesy of NASA at <http://visibleearth.nasa.gov>

Compositor: Newgen—Austin/G&S

Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

12 11 10 09 08 PAH 1 2 3 4 5

*To all teachers
who continue to
experiment*

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Digital Literature: Electronic Archives in the Classroom

1

Allen Webb

In his imaginative short story “The Library of Babel,” the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges describes an infinite library with hallway after hallway, spiral staircases, and interconnected hexagonal galleries filled with books. The narrator has apparently lived all his life in the library “wandering in search of a book, perhaps the catalogue of catalogues” and, along with other “Men of the Library,” he tries to understand the vastness and meaning of the collected volumes. At one point the men speculate that the library houses all the known works of the universe:

When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the first impression was one of extravagant happiness. All men felt themselves to be the masters of an intact and secret treasure. There was no personal or world problem whose eloquent solution did not exist in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe suddenly usurped the unlimited dimensions of hope. At that time a great deal was said about the Vindications: books of apology and prophecy which vindicated for all time the acts of every man in the universe and retained prodigious arcana for his future. Thousands of the greedy abandoned their sweet native hexagons and rushed up the stairways, urged on by the vain intention of finding their Vindication. These pilgrims disputed in the narrow corridors, proffered dark curses, strangled each other on the divine stairways, flung the deceptive books into the air shafts, met their death cast

down in a similar fashion by the inhabitants of remote regions.
Others went mad . . . (1969, 79)

Borges' engaging and disturbing 1941 science fiction about life in an infinite library becomes a metaphor for the rapidly expanding and seemingly infinite library that now confronts us at our computer screens: the Internet. In at least one way, Borges was prophetic. Our civilization's libraries are being digitized with astonishing inclusiveness and speed. Jerome McGann, in his study *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* (2004), argues that Western civilizations' entire cultural archive is moving onto the Web. For instance, the digital archive Early English Books Online purports to have digitized *every text* published in the English language before 1700—over 150,000 volumes. In the past, such resources were available only in specialized archives, often in remote locations and off-limits to the public. But what was accessible only to specialized scholars is now broadly available. Project Gutenberg currently offers over 17,000 free electronic books, with two million downloads every month. Relatively speaking, these are rather small archives and just the beginning. Google, in collaboration with the largest research libraries in the world (including Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, the Universities of California, Texas, Michigan, Virginia, and world libraries at Oxford, Madrid, and Germany) is well on the way to digitizing millions and millions of books. And there are hundreds more extensive online literary text archives where valuable and teachable works can be found. All of these texts are digitized; many include hyperlinked glossing and rich background information.

What does this sea change in the availability and delivery of literary texts offer to English teachers and students? Do we, like the men of the library in Borges' story, find ourselves the happy masters of all knowledge, or are we driven mad by an ever-increasing oversupply of information? Before you strangle someone on the divine stairways or throw your computer into an air-shaft, let us examine some possibilities for utilizing the virtual library of the Internet to extend and enhance the teaching of literature.

■ Teaching Poetry with Online Archives

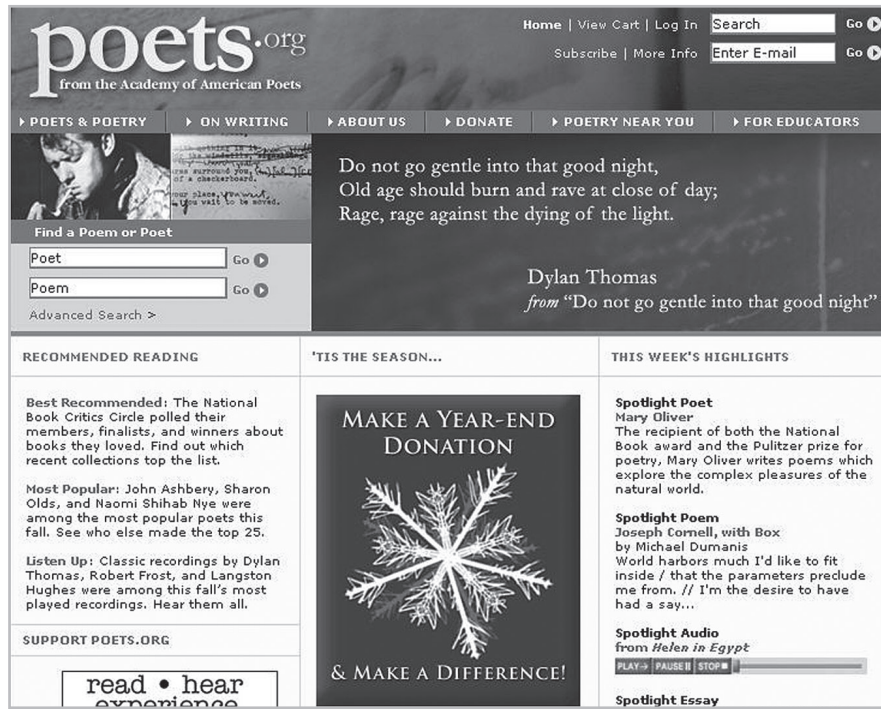
Even before the Internet, textbooks for literature courses were simply getting bigger and bigger as they tried to include the expanding literary canon. One anthology I was looking at had 1,608 oversized pages and approached ten pounds. These anthologies are also expensive. A price tag of \$80 is not at all uncommon—cheap, I suppose I *should* say, for so many great works of literature.

Last fall, a mix-up in editions suddenly meant that my introductory literature course would be without the monster anthology for at least a few weeks. Driven away from my textbook, I went online to look for reading material. What I found was an unbelievable depth and range of digitized literary texts. Most of the poems, plays, and short stories that were in the textbook were also available on the Web—along with much, much more. After a few hours of looking at the possibilities, I decided to teach the entire class using the amazing digital archives, literature sources, and texts found on the Web.

My course began with poetry. I was less concerned about specific authors, genres, or historical periods and more focused on helping students read carefully and closely while enjoying the works. I found extensive archives of classic and contemporary poetry—free, readily available, and at a wide range of reading levels. During our first class meeting, I showed students how to navigate sites and provided them with Web addresses of the Academy of American Poets, Poetry Archives, Bartleby, Project Gutenberg, American Verse Project, Library of Congress Poetry Resources, University of Toronto Poetry Online, British and Irish Poetry, *Poetry Magazine*, Poetry House, Poetry Archive, and the University of Virginia Modern English Text Archive. Our reading for the first three weeks of class entailed students surveying these archives, identifying poetry that appealed to them, and writing about those poems and how they use language and imagery. Many students sought out famous poets (including Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, and Emily Dickinson) and established classics (Shakespeare, Keats, and Wordsworth). Students also found, read, and enjoyed poetry by outstanding contemporary writers less familiar to me including Adrian Henri, Samuel Menashe, Polly Peters, Gillian Clark, Billy Collins, Alison Groggon, and many others. Many sites featured not only the poetic texts, but also recordings of poems read aloud (in the case of living poets, often by the poet). The Poetry Archive site, for example, describes itself as, “the world’s premier online collection of recordings of poets reading their work.”

Reading poetry from this diverse group of online archives meant that students were immersed in a world of poetry in a way that they simply could not be with a traditional textbook. So many of these sites are *alive*, connected to living poets and to poetry lovers. The Academy of American Poets (Figure 1-1), for instance, features a “National Poetry Calendar” where students can search for poetry events near them. This site also advertises poetry book clubs; accepts manuscripts from contemporary poets; gives poetry awards; produces a free podcast; offers a free newsletter; and provides reading recommendations, lesson plans, and resources for teachers. Other sites let students explore poetry in other ways, again far beyond what is possible in

FIGURE 1-1 *The Academy of American Poets*



Screenshot courtesy of *The American Academy of Poets*

printed text. The American Verse Project assembles volumes of American poetry published before 1920 and allows users to search for occurrences of words and phrases throughout the entire full-text archive—thousands of poems. The Poetry Foundation site includes searches by category, occasion, title, first line, and popularity. This site also features articles, audiovisual materials, links to poetry resources on the Web, subscriptions to poetry magazines, letters to the site, and more.

These poetry resources can be used by students and teachers at almost any level. They brought my introductory students into the world of professional poets, and lovers and scholars of poetry, so writing poetry or writing about poetry became a way to participate in an active community beyond the classroom. My students discovered that poetry need not be something frozen in a book. The freedom to move from site to site exploring the available resources was, in fact, empowering. Rather than simply taking the poems selected by the publisher of a textbook as my curriculum, my students were able to navigate the world of poetry, and the choices they made further developed their

interest. As my students created links to their favorite poems and published these on their blogs (see Chapter 3 for more on blogs), they were in effect creating their own anthologies, inviting other students in the class to read their favorite poems and comment on them along the way.

My initial fear about reading poetry online, rather than from an anthology or textbook, was that students wouldn't give the language they viewed on a computer screen the same care they gave the printed word. I know that I prefer to have paper in front of me, and that I invariably write in my book—underlining and scribbling notes on words and lines. I suspect that people “read” the Internet in almost the same way they watch television commercials, letting many things go by without concentration. So I talked with my students about the kind of close reading I wanted them to engage in. In class, we used a data projector to display and magnify poetry so the whole class could read and discuss it. With a poem projected on the screen, I pointed at specific words, phrases, and even punctuation—modeling engaged, close reading. Of course, any of the poems found online could be printed out on paper, but somewhat to my surprise that neither happened nor seemed necessary. My impression was that students were able to read the digital texts with careful attention. That sense of reading with careful attention was magnified in the next assignment.

■ Digitized Texts and Textual Intervention

One of the remarkable things that can happen with online archives is that their digital texts can be copied and pasted into your word-processing program. This ability to take the words of a poem—or any work of literature—and put them into your word processor creates powerful close reading possibilities. The word processor lets us blend the actions of reading and writing together, and it makes rewriting and revision so much easier. When students have literary works in front of them in their own word processor instead of on paper or in an anthology, the potential possibilities for “scribbling” on the text are greatly amplified.

One day I projected an online version of Keats' “Ode on a Grecian Urn” onto the screen for class discussion. After reading the poem aloud, students identified interesting images, wrote about them, and then shared their thoughts. Each of the images we examined took us deeper into the poem's reflection on the message of the urn, the tension in the poem between organic life that changes, grows old, and dies, and the eternal beauty of art that the urn (and Keats too, we wondered) championed. We had an in-depth and engaging

classroom conversation about this rich and wonderful work, though our text was only on the screen—a medium far more ephemeral than the urn itself.

Next I directed the students, who were stationed at computers, to copy and paste the poem into a Microsoft Word document. Looking for teaching ideas the night before, I had read the fascinating website of Keats scholar Jeffery C. Robinson, professor of English at the University of Colorado in Boulder. On a page hosted at the Romantic Circles website (“dedicated to the study of Romantic Period literature and culture”), Robinson describes his teaching experiments with “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” He has the students do what he calls “deform” the poem, rewriting it into a new work. “When I deform a poem, I bring to it a highly selective consciousness and intervene materially in its existence, just as Keats does in encountering the Grecian Urn,” Robinson states. His student Andrew describes the process:

I slowly crushed the piece into different shapes. I broke it down and built it up again. I RETURN, RETURN, DELETE, DELETE, DELETE. Up and down the words skipped, lines jumping and leaping all over the computer screen trampoline.

When I tried Robinson’s experiment in my own class, I was surprised by the ease with which my students took to the activity. For the first time this talkative class worked in silence. The only student comment came fifteen or twenty minutes into their busied activity when Anthony—a serious student—asked, “Can we add words?” Eventually I asked if anyone wanted to share the version they had created of the poem. One student read hers aloud. Meghan, a freshman, posted a version of the poem to her blog and shared it with the class. She told us that the poem that she was adapting from Keats’s work was becoming a piece about spousal abuse, and she titled it, “Bound by Marriage, Embraced by Abuse.”

Bride of quietness,
child of silence,
Those unheard are sweeter,
more endeared.
Though canst not grieve,
though thou hast not thy bliss.
Play on, fair youth,
thy song cannot fade.
Forever wilt thou love.
Never canst thou leave!
More happy love!

(Forever breathing sorrow)
More happy, happy love!
(Forever panting, burning)
Sacrifice thy peace
Or silent be for evermore
And ne'er return.
Fair attitude trodden
By thy marble man
And by eternity.
In midst of silent woe
Truth doth tease you
But wasted beauty is all you know.

In his book *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies* (2006), Rob Pope talks about the way his students rewrite works of great literature in order to investigate not only language but also cultural and historical contexts. Meghan's version of Keats, for example, while playful and clearly a very different work than its source also raises questions about the gendered language of Keats' poem and the nature of his idyllic imagination of Greek romantic relationships. The ease and potential for textual intervention is greatly increased by the availability of digital texts. Students might cut and paste texts in such a way as to change genres, turning poetry into prose or vice versa. They could put a complicated nonlinear work into chronological order, or jumble the order to make its reading more interesting. The point is that the language of literature becomes something that students can get their hands and heads into, work with, manipulate for meaning, and thus come to see literature as actively created, interpreted, and reinterpreted.

Rewriting the Odyssey

I engaged in other experiments in close reading and creative writing in the next class assignment when my students read the *Odyssey*. One of the founding works of Western literature and a great read, the *Odyssey* is frequently taught at the ninth-grade level. Of course these students are not going to read the epic in ancient Greek. Since the Renaissance, the *Odyssey* has been translated into English over and over again by some of our language's most famous poets and scholars. Each translation is different, and reflects the literary and cultural sensibilities of the translator and their time. Some of these translations are justly celebrated. Perhaps most famous of those celebrations is the sonnet composed by Keats when he was twenty-one. John Chapman's translation of the

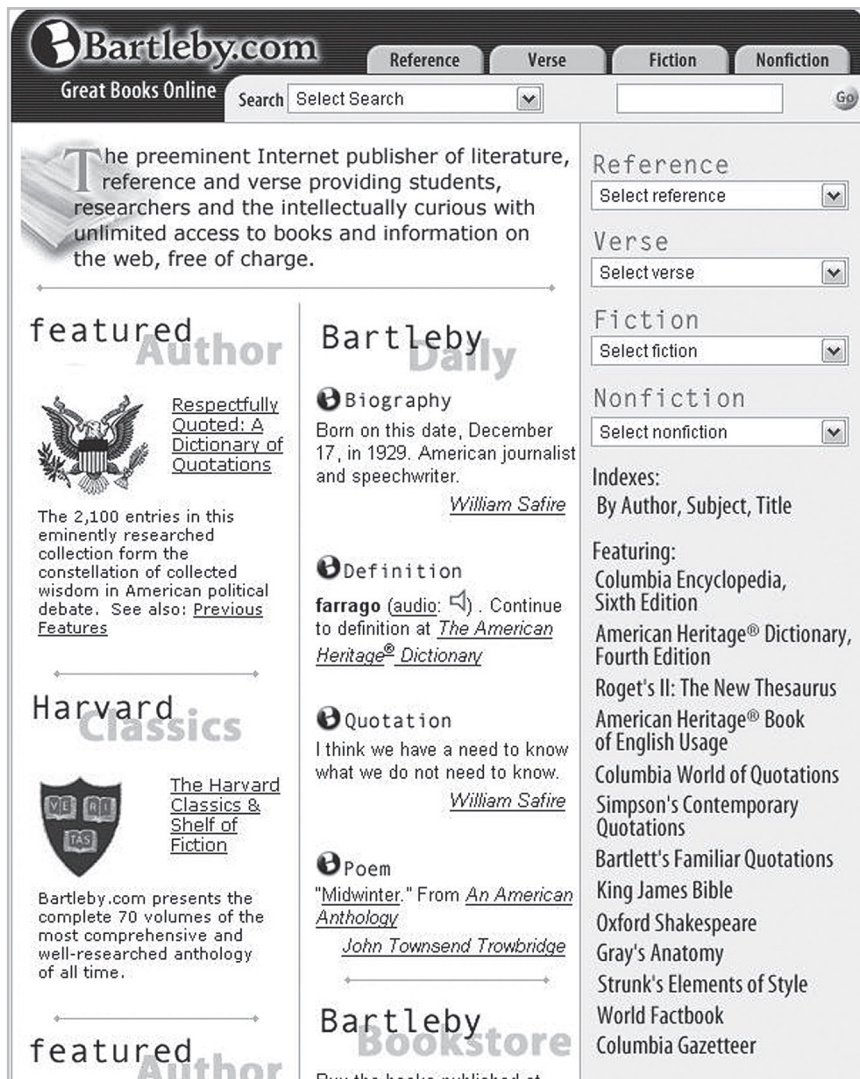
Odyssey—the first translation of the work into English—was put before Keats one evening by his friend C. C. Clarke, and they sat up together until daylight to read it, “Keats shouting with delight as some passage of especial energy struck his imagination. At ten o’clock the next morning, Mr. Clarke found the sonnet on his breakfast-table” (Seward 1909, 411).

Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star’d at the Pacific—and all his men
Look’d at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

I can’t promise that your students will respond with the same wonder—or poetic creativity—as Keats, yet studying different English translations of great world literature is certainly a rich and interesting way to engage with the text.

Looking online, I was able to find sixteen different English translations of the *Odyssey* available in digital archives, including Chapman’s 1616 translation (at Bartleby.com—see Figure 1–2); Alexander Pope’s in 1725 (Project Gutenberg, 17,000 free electronic texts); William Cowper’s in 1791 (Bibliomania, 2,000 free online texts); Samuel Butcher and Andrew Lang’s in 1879 (www.robotwisdom.com); Samuel Butler in 1900 (MIT Internet Classics Archive, 450 works); and a whole host of recent translations viewable at Amazon.com via the “search inside” feature. (Amazon itself is an interesting sort of archive, one where students can contribute their own comments and evaluations of texts.) I even came across an ancient Greek version with word-by-word transliteration into English at the Perseus Digital Library. In finding some of these sites, I was helped by Jorn Barger’s list of *Odyssey* translations at robotwisdom.com. I posted links to all these translations on my website, and in class we examined several translations of the first thirty lines of the poem. (For this assignment, see my site, www.allenwebb.net; the course is English 1100.)

FIGURE 1-2 *Bartleby.com*



Screenshot courtesy of Bartleby.com Inc.

My students were able to pick out substantial differences in the format and style of the translations, and when they looked closely at the word choice and phrasing they could also see how translations affected the reader's understanding of characters and events. At first students were drawn to the easier, more modern prose translations. But as we began to compare those translations

with some of the older, denser, and poetic translations, I was astonished that the students kept saying that the older versions were “better” and that some of the newer translations seemed “lazy” (their word, not mine). Indeed, Alexander Pope’s 1725 translation of the *Odyssey* emerged as the class favorite!

The students’ first paper assignment on the *Odyssey* was to examine two or three of these translations from different digital archives in order to see how translation shaped the meaning of the work. I was delighted to see the careful readings that resulted from this activity. I quote from three student papers:

Anyone trying to understand the poem [should] read more than one version to see the many layers in the original and expand the imagination to see what each line could have meant.

—Rachel

Subtle changes in word choice can produce different meanings, connotations, or a completely separate view of central characters . . . [Samuel] Butler’s use of the word “ingenious” brings to mind thoughts of a quick-witted, even a cunning individual; one who never lacks a plan to get himself out of trouble. By describing Odysseus as being well known for “wisdom’s various arts,” [Alexander] Pope establishes a hero who is skilled and clever in multiple ways, rather than just quick on his feet.

—Meghan

Changes in the ideas and language of every society that has been exposed to the epic story have in turn altered the poem itself. These new versions may sound nothing like Homer’s would have in the fields and villages of Ancient Greece, but the changes ensure that this work of art has lived on as long as it has and will undoubtedly live far into the future.

—Andrew

Seeing many different versions of the same work also whetted student interest in the writing process. Students saw how translators had made subtle changes in words and phrases, and that even the *Odyssey* was open to revision and reinvention. Now I wanted them—even though they knew no ancient Greek—to do their own translation. (Before I had heard of “textual intervention” this idea was once suggested to me by Kim Bell, working with ninth graders at the Lake Forest Academy near Chicago.) I asked my students to choose a passage of the *Odyssey* that they found interesting for the images or events described, and then study several different English translations of those lines. (The original Greek text is available at the Perseus Archive.) Then

by looking closely at different translations, they were to “interpolate” word-by-word meaning and create their own “translated” version of the lines. They could choose to make their version as contemporary as they liked and were free to write in either poetry or prose. Ashley wrote,

Once you get going with this it isn't so difficult anymore. It's actually (dare I say it?) kind of, a little, teeny, tiny bit fun to do. Doing this definitely gives a significantly larger grasp of the literal story.

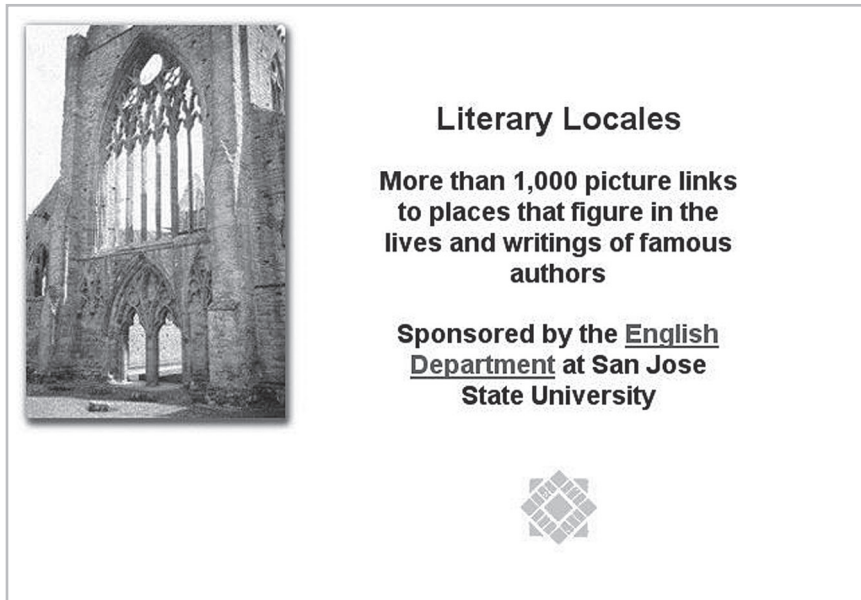
I certainly enjoyed reading their translations. Here is a sample of a very contemporary prose written by my student Alicia:

When the beautiful red morning sun started to shine through the bedroom window, Telemachus woke up, showered and got dressed. He put his sandals on his feet, brushed his teeth, and put his sword over his shoulder before leaving the house looking handsome as ever. Then, he sent an announcement around to call everyone of the town together for a meeting. Telemachus does not travel alone, so he took his two cute little dogs with him to meet at the gathering place. As he walked by the people of the town to get to his seat, the most prestigious men even made space for him to pass through. Telemachus had a classy presence to him as he took over his father's chair.

Alicia clearly made the *Odyssey* her own. Having seen how translators modify the source text, she was comfortable making changes to convey the meaning as she understood it. I like the way her version sounds like contemporary speech, and I love the tooth-brushing! At the end of the semester, several students identified this creative translation writing as their favorite assignment.

Students can cut and paste from electronic texts and create their own commentary (or hypertext) with notes on specific words, characters, or ideas. They can make comments in different colors, perhaps using “track changes” to indicate thoughts of characters or to add to descriptions of settings. My students have tried many of these hypertextual interventions. One student worked with a collection of Garcia Lorca poems, hyperlinking them to each other around key images and metaphors and adding images that the poems referred to. Another student took Poe's short story, “The Tell Tale Heart,” and, by linking from a number of words in the work, created a series of the inner thoughts of the narrator and provided a psychological justification for the murder. In a similar way, another student took Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, “The Minister's Black Veil,” and, focusing on the character of Elizabeth,

FIGURE 1–3 *Literary Locales*



Screenshot courtesy of *Literary Locales*

linked to a series of monologues she had written that retold the story from Elizabeth’s point of view. A student created several different interventions into an Anton Chekhov short story, changing the social class of the characters in one, modernizing the tale in another, and altering the ending in a third. To each of these he added an explanation of the choices he made. Students can also insert pictures to create their own illustrated works—very effective with visually strong pieces such as the *Odyssey*. To find images for this exercise, visit the Literary Locales website (Figure 1–3), an archive of “picture links to places that figure in the lives and writing of famous authors.”

These activities are not only possible with digitized texts, they are appropriate to the medium. Indeed, in *Radiant Textuality*, McGann argues that the digitizing of literary works is never just a recopying, but always a translation, creating new interpretations and additional layers of meaning.

■ Diversifying Cultural Perspectives

Lest you think that my students only work with traditional literary works, our next unit focused on reading digital texts from war, particularly the War in Iraq. We began by reading some classic war poetry and literature—all online—



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