

Using *Jacob Have I Loved* in the High School English Classroom

Betsy Gardiner, currently of MacDonough High School in Charles County, Maryland, implemented a unit using *Jacob Have I Loved* with her students when she was teaching at Chopticon High School in St. Mary's County, Maryland. She believed her students, from a very rural, agricultural part of Maryland, would be able to relate to the sense of isolation Louise, the main character of *Jacob Have I Loved*, feels as she comes to maturity on Rass Island, modeled after the islands in the Chesapeake Bay situated near St. Mary's County. But Betsy was concerned that her students would not appreciate the historical elements of the novel, so she began her unit by using a talking heads video narrated by Richard Dreyfus, from A&E Home Entertainment, in which celebrities, such as Ben Bradlee and the widow of Jackie Robinson, discuss their very personal memories of World War II, which is a significant aspect of the setting of *Jacob*.

Other Invitations into *Jacob Have I Loved*

Another aspect of the introduction to this novel involves creating a collaborative web on the word *loved*; students brainstorm what kinds of love exist in the world and what barriers exist to love and loving. Students are given a letter to "Dear Abby" to which they are asked to respond as Abby might. (Male students are given a copy signed with a male name; female students are given one signed with a female name.)

Dear Abby,

I feel like my parents hate me. They certainly ignore me, and it's just not fair.

They spend all their time and energy my younger sister just because she's always

been what they call “fragile.” That means she’s sick a lot and so she always says she can’t do chores, or can’t do things like go hiking and outdoor activities or play sports. Anything she wants, they get for her. Anything I want they tell me to get for myself! I feel like I’m always in her shadow. I work hard at a part-time job, and I do a lot of chores around the house, but they just focus on my sister’s needs. Things have just gotten worse because they said they’re sending her away to study music. She’s got some talent, I have to admit, but what about me? What am I supposed to do? I feel stuck and unloved and don’t know how to get unstuck.

Signed,

Ann/Andy

After responding to Ann/Andy, student papers are collected and discussion follows about the kind of advice they gave as Abby. We group the responses into categories; recently such headings as “Stop whining—be glad you’re not fragile,” “Focus on your strengths,” “Love yourself,” or “Get a life!” emerged, and were posted on a bulletin board for reference throughout discussions.

Students then are told that the character of Louise in *Jacob Have I Loved* could have written Ann’s letter. As they read, they are to decide whether and how their advice might be applicable to Wheeze given the historical time frame of her life. They also learn that Paterson, writing about the process of creating *Jacob*, states, “Setting for me is not a background against which a story is played out, but the very stuff with which the story will be woven. The characters will not determine the setting, but the setting to a great extent will determine both what they [the characters] will be like and how they will act” (1981, 85).

Exploring Language and Setting

Paterson got the setting for this book when her sister gave her son John a book about the crabs and waters of the Chesapeake Bay (McGinty 2005, 58). She also did interviews with watermen. It took her three years to write the novel—in the midst of it, her mother was dying of cancer. But the hardest part was struggling with the “pain of being too close to her own childhood feelings of jealousy” (60). The title is an allusion to the Biblical story of Jacob and Esau, twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob, the younger twin, tricks Esau into giving up his birthright as the firstborn in exchange for a cup of soup. Rebekah favors Jacob and so helps him, too, to steal their father’s blessing, as he is dying, from Esau. Additionally, Jacob then marries Leah, the less than beautiful older sister of Rachel, who lives her life knowing that her husband is passionately in love with her younger sister. Thus was born the story of Louise, the elder, more homely, twin, and Caroline, the fragile, beautiful and talented one—a story of years of anger, bitterness, and jealousy written, in part, because Paterson wants us to know what we can do for the Louise’s of the world.

Paterson as Poet

Betsy focuses on the detail and language Paterson uses to create Rass Island, citing Paterson who writes that she once heard a very fine writer express anger toward an editor who complained that she couldn’t tell where one of her stories was taking place. The writer said place didn’t matter, that her story could have taken place anywhere. Paterson says that’s not true.

A story can no more take place anywhere than a human being can exist no where. One of the most ancient heresies of the Christian faith is Gnosticism. The Gnostics distrusted matter. They believed that matter was evil and only pure spirit was good. Gnosticism not only makes for bad religion, it makes for terrible fiction. The world of the story must be created or recreated in concrete detail. Matter matters, and part of the process of uncovering a story lies in discovering the appearance, feel, smells, sounds, and even the tastes of the world in which it unfolds. (1982, 328)

Writing a Place

After listing as many of the sensory details about Wheeze's world as they can find, students work in groups to collect sensory detail about some aspect of their own community—from a tobacco barn to the school gym. Their task is to write a paragraph so vivid that listeners or readers can know the place being evoked without its name actually being given. Paterson states,

My task is to make what might be an exotic world so real that the reader will be able to enter it, to see and smell and hear and taste it. A historical novel or a novel set in a distant or unknown world is not primarily an opportunity to teach the reader about another culture. It is a story, and there is no place in a story for deliberate didacticism. What the writer must do is supply those concrete details that will make this world real to the reader and thus bring this story to life. I went to Deal Island one day primarily to sniff because Virginia (her editor) complained that she couldn't quite smell Rass Island. (1982, 329)

Students respond to each others' writing by saying whether they can hear the place, smell it, feel it, and see it.

The Writer's Toolbox

In class, where we compare *Jacob Have I Loved* with *Lyddie*, we talk about the importance of both the historical and physical worlds in which Lyddie and Wheeze find themselves, asking how, if at all, their journeys toward self-acceptance and the ability to reach out to others would have been different if they were coming of age in contemporary society. Betsy has her students attend explicitly to Paterson's language by asking them to find examples of simile, metaphor, and personification used in *Jacob* and then talking about the value of these tools of Paterson's literary craft. Some of those her students worked with included:

So as the water nibbled away at our land, the war nibbled away at our souls.

Shiny as a new crab pot, all set to capture the world.

I don't need watched like one of your old peelers.

August and February are both alike in one way. They're both dream killers.

I felt as though God had lowered a giant glass lid over the whole steaming Bay.

The three trees were still there, looking a bit like little boys after their summer haircuts.

Relief washed over me like a gentle surf.

It was like cuddling a stone.

Just the look on the Captain's face ripped my heart right out of my chest.

Call turned the color of a steamed crab at her touch.

For awhile our noses and lungs feasted on nature's goodness, our eyes were assaulted by evidence of her savagery.

Why don't you just teach a crab to play the piano?

It was hard to fight the wind screaming like a giant wounded dove.

February hits you right in the stomach.

I knew of course, I knew as though I were swallowing an icicle.

I had forgotten, that life, like a crab pot, catches a lot of trash you haven't bargained for.

As gently as she might coax a nocturne from our old piano.

I followed them to Auntie Braxton's house like a beaten hunting pup.

I sat there stunned, as though someone had thrown a rock in my face.

It was a ritual as serious as the morning prayers of a missionary.

Shaking her hand was like holding a bunch of twigs.

Anything dumber than a blowfish, it's a county board of education."

Youth is a mortal wound.

The old lady moaned like someone disturbed by a bad dream."

I turned on her like a red-bellied snake.

I could almost imagine I was an Egyptian slave taking Pharaoh on a tour of the flooded Nile Delta.

I was a good oyster in those days. Not even the presence of a radiant, grown-up Caroline could get under my shell.

February is just plain malicious. It knows when your defenses are down.

My spiritual health was about on par with a person who's been dead three days.

I reached in and turned the twin so that she was delivered head first, but blue as death.

Notice how often Paterson uses language of the waterman's world to capture the essence of a character's emotional state; Louise describes herself as "good oyster," or a "beaten hunting dog"; Call turns the color of a "steamed crab." The external environment often mirrors a character's internal turmoil—February is malicious and a dream killer, as is August. Louise, as the narrator, thinks about philosophical issues by using metaphors of her daily life to make her more abstract thoughts concrete, comparing life to a crab pot, both of which catch a lot of trash. Looking at language in this way leads to asking if Paterson accomplished her goals in making the worlds of Lyddie and Wheeze so vivid that we believe in them and can imagine the characters in no other.

Paterson herself says *Jacob* took her a long time to write because she could not figure out where it was set. Once she did, "the setting was so much a part of the plot and had so much to do with developing the characters that I could not possibly separate out the elements" (1982, 328). Paterson also knew that theology—good or bad—would have a part in the story. Once she found the setting and then knew that real communities existed with much more of a sense of religious commitment than she had believed existed, she did not have to "hunt about for metaphors—the setting lavished them upon me—which, indeed, I believe any setting will, if the writer will look closely enough, and if it is the proper world for the story which is being told" (1982, 328).

Students as Historical Researchers

Additionally, Betsy has her students engage in research to help them understand the research aspects of historical fiction. She also uses this activity to help students become better at dealing with the kinds of test items they will face on their county and state exams by having them generate questions of different sorts. Her Information Search activity invites students to become the teachers:

Jacob Have I Loved *Information Search*

You are the teacher today. You have been assigned a specific research topic. Research (on designated websites) and summarize your topic in *1 page*. Summarize key events and people. *Then*, develop a test to that you would give afterward (8 questions). The questions must be broken down like this on the test.

1. *5 factual recall questions* (Consider what you think is important for your audience to retain/remember, i.e., Identify, List, True/False, Multiple Choice)
2. *2 brief short answer questions* (Try considering bigger stuff rather than just recall information, i.e., Describe, Cause/Effect, and so on)
3. *1 extended/essay question* (Consider what you think is lasting information and can be developed into a lengthier response, i.e., Compare and contrast, Do you think . . . and why?)

Topic 1

Religion is a large part of *Jacob Have I Loved*. Your group's task is to research background information about the Methodist religion and woman's role within the religion.

Use the following sites as references:

<http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data1/dg/methodist/methfem.html>

www.webstationone.com/fecha/religion.htm

Topic 2

The setting of *Jacob Have I Loved* takes place slightly before, during, and after World War II. Your group's task is to research background information about the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Use the following sites as references:

<http://plasma.nationalgeographic.com/pearlharbor>

<http://history.navy.mil/photos/events/wwii-pac/pearlhbr/pearlhbr.htm>

Topic 3

The setting of *Jacob Have I Loved* takes place in the Chesapeake Bay. Your group's task is to research background information about the Chesapeake Bay.

Use the following sites as references:

www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/mdmanual/01glance/html/ches.html

www.chesapeakebay.net/about.htm

Extending the Novel Through Persuasive Writing

Another activity Betsy offered her students, given to them in the form of the extended response item they encounter on their high school assessments is designed to help them develop persuasive skills.

The Task

Now that you have finished reading Chapter 14, you know that Captain Wallace uses his

widow's legacy to send Wheeze's twin sister, Caroline, to music school in Baltimore. He even claims Sara Louise was responsible for giving him the idea. He does this because Caroline has not been able to pursue her voice lessons in Salisbury due to the hardships of the war, and he and Trudy greatly enjoyed and valued her singing. He feels indebted to their family for befriending him and suggesting the marriage, and wants to give something back.

In this writing assignment, pretend you are the ever-passed over, unmusically gifted Wheeze. Your object is to convince Captain Wallace that his judgment is not sound or equitable and that you rightfully deserve some share of, if not all, the generosity and recognition he solely bestows on your musically gifted twin sister.

Prewriting/Brainstorming

To begin with, decide why you are so upset with the Captain's decision. On a piece of paper, list all the reasons why you disagree with his choice. Decide which your strongest justifiable arguments are, and which are less substantial. Organize your points from weaker to strongest and jot down anything you can think of which will support or explain your arguments.

Drafting

Begin with an introductory paragraph in which you express your outrage to the Captain for using Trudy's legacy to send Caroline to music school in Baltimore. Follow that with one paragraph for each of the main points you have to support your side of this argument. Fill in each paragraph with examples, facts, and feelings that support your

main point. Then, write an ending paragraph in which you summarize your arguments and restate your discontent with the Captain as your final statement.

Even students who had not been particularly enthusiastic about the novel, having been invited to become Louise, found themselves understanding her outrage. They had to revisit the text to find details about the Captain that might help them, as Wheeze, be more persuasive; they had to dig for information about Louise in order to write as truthful a letter as possible. The student who most identified with this somewhat unlikable young woman was a young man, often at odds with his teachers and other students, which provided Betsy with some new insights into his personality!

While many students do not like the ending of the novel, feeling that if it is about Louise's search for self-acceptance, it should stop as soon as she leaves the island, Paterson feels it has to come "full circle," ending with Louise the midwife as she helps usher a set of twins into the world. It is, according to Paterson, a story about reconciliation, just as the Biblical story is. Through her delivery of the twins, one strong and healthy, one weak and more fragile, Louise finally achieves that sense of reconciliation and thus peace that is at the heart of the novel.

Synectics

Another activity that helps students connect with characters but that they may not necessarily like is Synectics from Joyce and Weil's *Models of Teaching*. My daughter's teacher realized students did not care for Caroline even while they also found Louise too dark and egocentric. So she used this structured analogical thinking activity to help students better appreciate this character. First they brainstorm nonliving objects that

could be used to symbolize Caroline: honey, spider web, song, flute, embroidery, lace, Christmas ornament, sterling silver, Persian carpet, smoke, and sunshine got onto the list. They voted on one item that they thought made the best analogy and chose a spider web. Next they have to imagine that they awaken one morning to realize they've been turned into a spider web; they have to call out adjectives describing how it feels, emotionally, to be a spider web. *Fragile, powerless, beautiful, confined, complex, sticky, powerful, anticipatory, watchful, passive, aggressive, surprising, simple, strong, and exposed* came to mind.

Then they put together pairs of words from this list that, when paired, create tension because they are oxymoronic. My daughter's list included *powerful/powerless, simple/complex, passive/watchful, fragile/strong, confined/exposed, sticky/beautiful, surprising/passive, and anticipatory/passive*. She chose *simple/complex* to use as the basis for the next step—which is to identify nonliving objects that are both simple and complex. Her list included *sentences, music, love, matter, diamonds, poetry, cells* (this slipped it—cells are living), *rainbows, silk, levers, wheels, and fire*. At this point, the students pick one item and then revisit the initial prompt, in this case, Caroline, writing a paragraph with the thesis statement, “Caroline is like a _____ because _____.” Mandi wrote:

Caroline is like a rainbow. She is beautiful to look at, but she's distant and shimmery. She's not very solid and conditions need to be just right for her to shine. In the book, the conditions she needs to become a rainbow are the money to go to music school and marriage to Call to make her solid. Rainbows without sun and just the right angle of reflection don't exist. Wheeze is more solid and strong.

She doesn't need somebody else to really become herself. Even though she doesn't know that at first. Caroline needs other people to reflect off of her in order to be seen, like a rainbow does.

As a result of the synectics activity, which encouraged metaphoric thinking, students like Mandi come to insights about characters and their relationships that help them better appreciate how character development, environment, and theme are all intertwined.

***Jacob Have I Loved* as “American” Literature**

When I use *Jacob* in my classes, I ask students to complete a journal entry on the following topic: “To what extent does *Jacob Have I Loved* reflect the traditions that characterize American literature?” Is this a novel that could be included in a typical eleventh grade survey of American literature course? Why or why not? How does it echo the voices of our American literature canon?”

Note that I do not provide a definition of the term *American*. And I do not ask the students to do any research on how critics describe the characteristics of American literature. I do ask them to think about their high school reading experiences in their American literature survey course, or about any college reading experiences in American literature, and to compare *Jacob* to other titles that are typically part of the high school curriculum. What connections do they see between *Jacob* and any of those titles? Different students have reflected on *Jacob* by talking about titles as diverse as *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* to *Of Mice and Men*, from *The Devil and Daniel Webster* to *Death of a Salesman*. Students have written about *The Scarlet Letter*, *The*

Awakening, about James Fennimore Cooper and Sinclair Lewis. Poems have been referenced—by Sandburg, Thoreau, Stevens, Marianne Moore, Whitman. No matter what comparison they made, students brought their own experience of American literature to bear in ways that showed how, for them, *Jacob* resonated in terms of theme, style, a sense of optimism or openness to the world and to change in ways that surprised me and pushed my own thinking about the defining characteristics of American literature.

(Note that all references cited in this chapter are provided in the Works Cited section of *Teaching Selected Works of Katherine Paterson*.)