

## Literary Weavings: Extending Response through the Arts

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*"The use of a literary weaving gives those of us who have read the story a chance to look back and re-live the book. For people who have not read the book, they can get a taste of what it is all about. It can spark their interest so they'll want to read it, too."*

[Courtney]

The idea for a literary weaving came to me the way most teaching ideas seem to arrive, as an adaptation of something I'd seen or read about. For years I'd invited students to design quilt squares as a means of representing their visual response to a book, yet I'd never considered transferring this visual response idea from paper squares onto long strips of adding machine tape. Then about two years ago, I attended an NCTE conference workshop with a weavings theme, and the seeds for a literary weaving response project were planted. During that full-day workshop, we heard speakers, authors, even illustrators address the notion of story weaving into their talks. Then, toward the late afternoon break, participants were all given a strip of paper and asked to create a design representing any book we'd read. Once finished, these were woven through pieces of string tied to two pieces of wood. This idea intrigued me and I knew it had the potential to be adapted numerous ways. It wasn't long before I found a way to shape that idea into what I now call a literary weaving response project—a project that constructs and creates interpretation by weaving together literature and art.

### **Literary Weavings and the Challenges of War**

My undergraduate children's literature class had recently completed a class reading of Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight, Mr. Tom*, and each student had designed a three-foot paper strip reflecting his or her personal response to the book. The ideas represented and colors used on these strips then

served as the springboard for our class discussion of this common read. Following our discussion, the paper strips were collected and saved, to be woven in with paper strips we would soon design in response to our next reading, a choice from one of five books connected by the theme, "Challenges of War."

Since they had already designed and created a paper strip for *Goodnight, Mr. Tom*, this second book could be read with an eye for visual and graphic thinking, taking into consideration colors, images, symbols, designs, and significant words or quotes that might serve to extend their interpretation of the novel. Then, students would select from these key images and design a second paper strip creating a visual impression of their book's significance. Students claim they read this second book differently, knowing they'd be creating a visual response to it. Their responses changed from written and oral summaries ("I like . . ." and "I wonder . . .") to captured snippets of language and attempts to find the right color or shading or medium to represent an event, a character's mood, or even the tone of the novel. During the reading of this second book, I noticed their response notebooks included fewer words and frequent quick sketches of setting ideas, of items that seemed significant to the characters, and of possible shapes and designs to depict ideas or themes from their book.

Once again, we used the paper strips as the focus for our discussion about the book. This time, however, students were involved in two discussions: the first with those who'd read the same book, and the second as a member of a small group with classmates who'd all read different books. The paper strip served as an initial focus to explain the book through the designer's (reader's) eyes. It also prompted questions from those who hadn't read the book but were curious about what was represented on the paper strip. It is in this way that color and image offered a foundation for talk, for questions, and for illumination about the book that written words alone couldn't quite capture.

To culminate our literary focus on the challenges of war, we wove the paper strips from *Goodnight, Mr. Tom* in with the paper strips from our Challenges of War choice books—*Brady* (Jean Fritz), *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Jane Yolen), *The Fighting Ground* (Avi), *Little Brother* (Allen Baille), and *Park's Quest* (Katherine Paterson). What was created was a tapestry—a literary weaving—portraying the harsh colors and sharp edges of war and the calm shadings and gentle margins of peace. To complete our

weaving, we held one more whole class discussion, this time negotiating the choice of one color to use as the border around our weaving. Two colors dominated our discussion—red and black. Once we settled on black to capture the bleakness of war, I cut black tagboard and taped it along the edges of the students' paper strips, encasing their woven images. On red paper I printed the book titles, then splotted the black border with these, as if to remind every viewer of the blood shed during each war represented in the books we'd read. Our literary weaving now graces the wall outside my office in the English department where I teach (see color page 40a). Even though it's been up over five months, it still receives comment from passersby. As such, the books we read remain alive and are introduced to others by our visual interpretations.

### Visual Art as Interpretation

During the time I attended the NCTE conference, I was reading *Drawing Your Own Conclusions: Graphic Strategies for Reading, Writing, and Thinking* (Heinemann, 1992) by Fran Claggett and Joan Brown. I was struck by the authors' ideas as well as their rationale, mostly because they were saying what I've discovered whenever I've invited students to respond to literature with words as well as images.

Incorporating visual thinking and the graphic process into the classroom helps create a climate in which there can be no failure; a climate in which all students come to take responsibility for their own learning. It provides a starting point for class discussion; it teaches students to read closely; it encourages students to look back at text, to review it from different perspectives; and through group presentations, it allows students to teach each other. [p. 56]

Often it is through visuals—image, color, texture, design—that we see text differently. When we integrate strategies that include the arts into our reading/writing classrooms, not only do our students discover text anew, so do we as their teachers. At first, some of our students may seem reluctant to try artistic response. Others are apologetic for their efforts. And yet, once they discover the process of thinking through art and realize that the goal isn't award-winning visual products, they relax and allow their crayons, oil pastels, even watercolors to create undiscovered response for them.

Just as I expect students to trust rough draft writing to help them discover what they know and think, I expect the same for a visual project such as the literary weaving. Students are asked to sketch

ideas, even make color swatch samples to determine just the right shades either in their response notebooks or on planning sheets prior to creating their literary weaving strip. And, once they've completed their paper strip, I ask them to reflect upon what they discovered as a result of the work. In many ways, this process mirrors how I teach writing—creating thinking drafts, moving to fine tuned products, then pausing to reread and reflect on the piece. As with writing, I aim for students to make discoveries from their work during the process as well as while rereading. What I've found when students create response through art is fresh thinking, fewer repeated (or copied) ideas, and more understanding of symbol, metaphor, and image as meaning-filled interpretations of the text. And students discover this, too.

"In doing this literary weaving strip, I had hoped to capture more of the book and the meaning it we', trying to send. How do you capture the moment of truth . . . of someone who cannot keep a secret? The only way I could do this was by color, yet color is difficult to express a word like truth." [Tammie—in response to *Brady*]

"I decided to use dark but bold colors because the book kept dark secrets but released them boldly. The images I used were the coconut drinking cup, a sword, and the crow. The drinking cup was something that seemed to pull the two cultures together and it delivered refreshing spring water. The sword represents Park's need for enchantment, his bravery, and his quest. And the crow represents renewed life and freedom from dark secrets." Janice—in response to *Park's Quest*]

"I choose trees and green because the dense jungle was so incredibly impressed in my mind. GREEN everything seemed to be in the book. The monkeys and bicycle meant a lot to Vithy—and visually it was well described in the book. My choice to include a bit of red was to represent war. I wanted to write words and phrases in a way that represented more fear and urgency. Alas, I was unable to. They look silly—like a cartoon.... I guess I was surprised to see how little of the war I represented. I wanted to remember the hope and beauty—NOT the bad things. This book was about war. It was about a lot of anguish. I find myself dwelling on hope. My reading of the book left me a bit sad—frustrated at the treatment of other humans. But now, in my drawings I see hope . . . Vithy found good in the midst of a terrible situation. What a

message to everyone." [Becky—in response to *Little Brother*]

"The new thinking I came to was that maybe the reason we choose to dislike certain people is because we are afraid to see how truly like us they are." [Krista—in response to *Park's Quest*]

Turning to image-making and graphic thinking isn't unique to literary response. Whether paper strips are designed to provide a visual interpretation of a poem, to represent how a book fits a broad theme, or even to discover how facts can be portrayed visually, the reader and the viewer will be asked to think. And they'll be asked to respond in ways that discover as well as uncover meanings. Once the paper strips are woven together, who knows what symbols will stand out on top and which ones will be covered up? In many ways, that same uneven sense is what happens in the process of reading and response. Taking delight in what stands out and pondering what remains hidden is what active readers do whenever they represent what they read in new ways. As Courtney wrote at the conclusion of her self-reflection for our Challenges of War literary weaving, "I like the idea of coming together as a group after we read a story and creating something based on how the book touches us. I can't wait to see the final product!"

## References

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## **Classroom Connections**

### **Process for Literary Weaving Strips**

Below is a copy of the literary weavings project explanation and the self-reflection sheet I used with the "Challenges of War" theme mentioned earlier in this article. The heart of the planning is the suggestion to ponder colors and images as students read (and reread). I've also learned to remind them to consider making art medium choices that will clearly show the features they hope to represent. We've had less good luck using colored pencils unless enough pressure is used for colors to show up distinctly. ALSO I make a strong point about the use of white space. My reasoning is that I want students to treat white as a color choice and I've learned that too much white space on a paper strip results in a less visually appealing weaving.

#### **Challenges of War Literary Weaving Project**

You will be responsible for creating two sections of a class-created literary weaving, one from *Goodnight, Mr. Tom* and the other from your choice of a "Challenges of War" book (see syllabus for book choices). We'll work on the weaving strip for *Goodnight, Mr. Tom* during a class session, and you'll construct your weaving strip for your choice book at home. To plan your paper strip, I highly recommend that you skim or (re)read the books keeping this project in mind and jotting down ideas or quotes that may be usable in your paper strips. Pay attention to words and phrases, images, even colors that seem especially significant to each book. Then create a paper strip for each book that could serve as a means of prompting discussion about the book. Eventually we'll weave the paper strips together to create a literary weaving reflective of the challenges of war as represented through a sampling of children's literature.

Each paper strip must include both a written and visual response to the book:

—The written response will include either a significant "snippet" from the book or a key word(s) or phrase repeated on your paper strip. If you include a quote or phrase, be sure to include the page number somewhere on the strip.

—Visually, consider color(s), images, shapes, symbols, and designs that seem representative of, or significant to ideas, issues, themes, characters, setting, mood, tone in the book. Leave very little white space (unless white is especially significant), and design a paper strip related to something you found important in the book. Feel free to repeat symbols. I recommend not creating an entire scene, since weaving the strips together will cause you to "lose" aspects of your design underneath other woven pieces.

Use the space below (or other paper) to sketch some of your ideas and list possible words, phrases, and quotes. Once you've finished your paper strip, please complete the back of this explanation sheet. Bring your paper strip for your "Challenges of War" choice book along with this process/response sheet to class on \_\_\_\_\_.

*[back side of planning sheet]*

Based on your completed paper strip, explain your decisions (or design, symbol, color, words/quote) regarding both visual and written choices. What were you hoping to represent? How were you satisfied and/or less than satisfied? What new thinking about your book resulted from the creation of this project?