

literacy link

Winter 2014



SAGINAW VALLEY
STATE UNIVERSITY

Contents

From the Editors' Desk	2
My Transatlantic Path: An experience with revisiting transcendentalist literature, and the cultivation of an American identity	3
Reflections on Writing in Physics	6
Mapping Literature: A Close-Reading Strategy	8

My Transatlantic Path: An experience with revisiting transcendentalist literature, and the cultivation of an American identity



Laurence Paterson
SVSU Student

I recall a time where I reread some of the transcendentalist literature that I originally read in high school. In the summer of 2013 I had the chance to visit my native Scotland, and look over the reading list for some of my upcoming fall classes. The long and weighty list included works by Dickens, Melville, Hawthorne, and scrolling down I found the daunting and horrifying essays “Self-Reliance” (1841) and “The Poet” (1844) by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Pieces I had read and disliked as a high schooler. What I eventually discovered, however, was that after reading Emerson a second time while on my trip to Scotland, I was able to explore myself as an individual, and understand Emerson’s call to action for a representative poet and his description of a human spiritual connection with nature.

While I was excited to be back at Saginaw Valley within the next month, the trip to Scotland allowed me to spend some time at a croft my family owns near Fort William on the shores of Loch Linnhe with my Aunt, Uncle, and cousin. The croft itself is stone painted white and red, and sits across the Loch from Ben Nevis in the beautiful Scottish Highlands. There are tall, green hills behind the croft that overlook the glass-like, peaceful Loch, and stony shores beneath the Grampian Mountains that display a picturesque and breathtaking view.

The High School Experience; Self-Reliance and Nonconformity

I had my mind made up early about some of the more famous American transcendentalists. In high school I read Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and “The Poet,” loathing virtually everything the essays discussed. The language was pedantic and pretentious, there was an awkward and intimate view of the human relationship with nature, and above all, I believed that Emerson called for nonconformity for the sake of rebellion alone. Therefore, I found it difficult to revisit the essays with a completely open mind.

After a second reading I found that what Emerson discussed was not only in correlation with independent thought and self-reliance, but also the start of a national identity in American literature. “Self-Reliance” is Emerson’s essay about the random and intuitive mind of the individual, the importance of non-conformity and relying one’s own innate human instinct. In the following, Emerson argues that an individual’s self-sufficient views supersede the conforming or dependent thoughts of others: “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” (p.21). While Emerson stresses the significance of self-reliance and acting on one’s own whim, my initial reaction to the piece was that the ostentatious language portrayed the work as arrogant and brash. Therefore, based on what I had already read, I struggled to return to the work without bias.



Photo Courtesy of Laurence Paterson

My Transcendentalist Vacation

I hadn't been to the croft in over twelve years, and on the drive to Fort William, I wondered if a mature view would thwart the innocent, youthful, and romantic view of a place I loved so much before. But with no phone, no computer, and little to no contact with the outside world, I immersed myself in the material. I woke up early the next morning and left the croft while my cousin, Aunt, and Uncle were still asleep, climbing the hill behind our house with a copy Emerson's *Self-Reliance and other Essays* (1844). I reached the top and sat down. The air was misty, the sun was rising, and the cool winds made it difficult to read, but as Emerson began to discuss the rejection of conformity, I started to think about a genuine establishment of individualism:

Society is a joint stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the reader. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. Whoso must be a man, must be a nonconformist. (21)

When I first read this in 11th grade, I found this premature in the sense that it seems to establish the basis for rebellion, without calling into question the value of society, or of the institution; similar to that of a teenager rebelling for attention, or to stand out amongst others. The church, the corporation, and the Government appear to be abandoned, for the sake of rebellion alone. But I think, on that hilltop, I managed to understand that allowing oneself to accept the influence of society is a failure to trust fully in oneself, and to trust in one's intuitive wit as a part of human nature: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all mean, - that is genius" (1). Emerson's rejection of conformity is not simply about rebellion for rebellion's sake, but rather to trust the self rather over the unoriginal opinions of others, and thus, celebrate one's individuality.

I headed back, worrying my family was looking for me, eager to re-read "The Poet" in hopes that the human relationship with nature and the "call to action" for a representative writer would make more sense the second time around. Emerson describes the ideal poet in great detail: "The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the center" (67). According to Emerson, the poet is a representative writer who does not imitate, but acts as a medium who describes the true beauty and the deeper meaning of the nature that transcends the boundaries of the physical world, and attempts to describe the spiritual beauty of nature as well.

The Trip Home

I finished "The Poet" on the very same day with a newfound fascination for Emerson's work. Reading Emerson during my trip to the Scottish Highlands allowed me to consider the importance of celebrating my own individualism without adhering to the opinions of others, but also to understand that the poet Emerson called for was an archetype for trusting in oneself, and understanding the spiritual connection between nature and the individual. Upon my return to the U.S. I began to think that I had read the essays at a time where I could leave my conforming high school mind at the lunch table, and understand that this trip away from society was where I could rely on my own thought.

I called into question whether or not I had written off other works of literature after first read, but what re-reading "Self-Reliance" and "The Poet" taught me on my trip was less about the importance of giving literature a second chance, and more about adhering to our own opinions and thoughts because they are what make us unique among a society where fitting-in is held in such high regard.

References

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Poet." 1844. *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*.

Ed. Stanley Appelbaum. Dover Thrift Editions. New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1993. 19-38. Print.

---. "Self-Reliance." 1841. *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*.

Ed. Stanley Appelbaum. Dover Thrift Editions. New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1993. 19-38. Print.

Literacy Link is made possible by the continued generous support of the Office of the Vice President of Academic Affairs.

Reflections on Writing in Physics



Dr. Chris Nakamura
*Assistant Professor of
Physics*

Students often ask us why we have to do so much writing in the introductory physics labs. As educators we have recently been thinking and talking about when is the right time for a student to start writing about ideas in physics. Physics, of course, has a reputation for being a math-intensive discipline, and when you think about courses in physics, you're probably more likely to think about working problem sets than writing essays. However, writing is central to Physics, and to science more generally.

It is easy to consider math and physics as little more than manipulating symbols to calculate an answer, but that isn't really what either is about. Math and physics are about different ways of figuring things out using logical reasoning, in the case of math, or logical reasoning and experiments in the case of physics. Math provides a language by which we communicate our understanding of the world. The language spoken or written with pure mathematics is largely about logical proof of relationships among different kinds of numbers (though other abstract concepts are clearly also important). In both Math and Physics, if a particular number is not known or may take on many possible values, we use a symbol to represent that number. When we use this language in physics we are slightly less concerned about how the numbers themselves are related to one another, and more concerned about what meaning we have assigned to the symbols we use when writing and solving equations. From this position, Math can only go so far in telling us about the way the world works. We must be bilingual in our approach to thinking about Physics, equally comfortable sliding between mathematical expression and the common language, very often English in the US. In fact, it is words as much as equations that help us convey our ideas and argue for why some ideas may be correct and others must be incorrect.



Dr. Matt Vannette
*Assistant Professor of
Physics*

Words provide the context that let us understand the implications and applicability of equations. Many of us in physics view the process of doing physics as the process of making sense of the way the physical world works. In this view physics is a special kind of storytelling. It is telling a story of how a certain thing does or does not happen and supporting that story with precise symbolic math and reproducible experimental data. But the story doesn't just consist of the math or the data. The words set the context and allow other people to interpret the math and data.

Mapping Literature: A Close-Reading Strategy



Laura Eidam

Instructor of English

In their handbook of templates for academic writing, *They Say, I Say*, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein compare a common error in student writing to a car accident: “hit and run” quotations are “left dangling without any explanation” (44). This description and adjacent cartoon, titled “Don’t Be a Hit-and-Run Quoter,” elicits a wry smirk from students in the general-education literature classes where I apply Graff and Birkenstein’s advice (45). The analogy sticks with them, and for the most part they succeed in applying the related templates (or concepts behind them) for introducing, explaining, and responding to quotations. However, they continue to struggle with generating meaningful content for their responses. If you can pardon the pun, my students make *The Moves That Matter*, according to Graff and Birkenstein’s subtitle, but that’s often all they do; they are simply going through the motions.

The problem of having too little to say about quotations, of summarizing rather than responding critically, or of overgeneralizing prompted me to reconsider how I teach what, as academics, we have learned to do instinctively: select and close read passages. In response, I have adapted mind-mapping to teach close-reading skills in my literature classes. Also known as clustering or webbing, this popular brainstorming technique involves organizing ideas about a single topic into visual categories, resulting in a map, cluster, or web of information. Part sentence-diagram, part word-association game, mapping literature involves applying the concept of mind-mapping to one or two lines. Students copy the passage on a separate sheet of paper and brainstorm meanings for each element relative to the context, circling or underlining the connections between their ideas and the related portions of text.

Mapping literature is a simple concept that many of us already apply in the classroom. It is the way I approach this activity that I want to discuss here, in hopes of offering another strategy for helping our students avoid “hit-and-run” quotations. Mapping literature also helps students understand and appreciate the content and style of what they read and encourages them to generate original and accurate interpretations.

In-Class Activities

I introduce mind-mapping by writing a pithy excerpt on the board; my go-to example is a line towards the end of Ernest Hemingway’s short story, “The Hills Like White Elephants,” in which the narrator encourages his girlfriend to have an abortion: “Of course it does. But I don’t want anybody but you. I don’t want anyone else. And I know it’s perfectly simple” (542). This step always follows a conversation about Hemingway’s plot and writing style; once students understand the big picture, we take a close-up view of the passage by answering a series of questions:

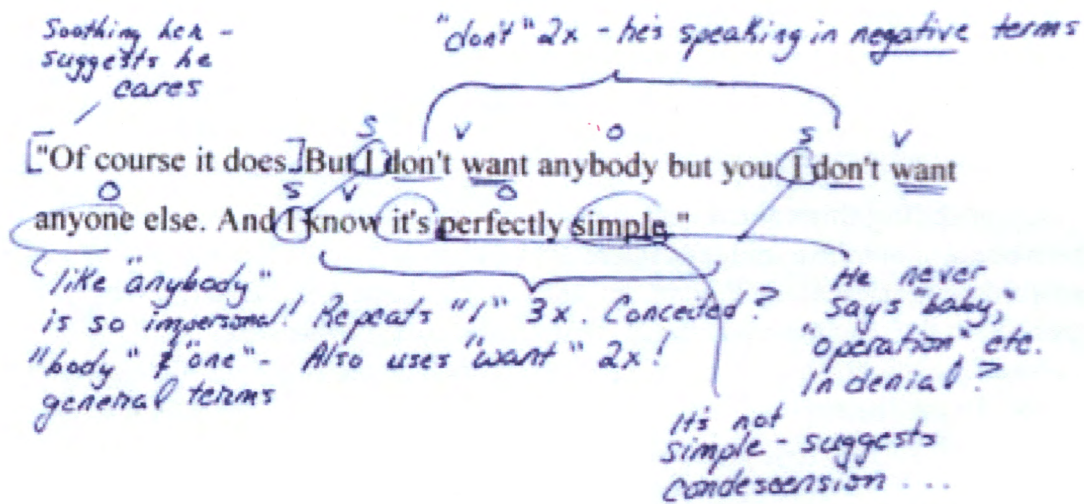
- "I" is repeated three times and always appears in the subject position. What does this pattern reveal about the narrator's values?
- Four words appear between "I" and "you" in the second sentence. What does this structure suggest about the relationship between these characters?
- Is the word "anybody" significant? What can we conclude about how he views her identity?
- Why does he use the word "it"? How would our perception of him change if he used "operation" or "child"?
- Is "perfectly simple" an example of irony? What kind? What does this phrase imply about her attitude during this conversation?

As students respond, I write down only the answers that the rest of the story reinforces as a way to stress that they can be creative with their interpretations within reason. I also underline, circle, or number relevant words, and label the subjects, verbs, and objects; the finished product, as I've recorded it on the board, is our map. Obviously, the questions are leading, and some, like the "anybody" questions, are a stretch. However, the point at this stage is to engage students in considering the language closely. I want them realize that they have plenty to say about literature, beyond simply summarizing the plot or making generalizations about characters. I also use this activity as a way to teach style and voice, concluding with a parallel Q&A session using Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" to illustrate the differences in narration and tone from one example to the next.

Once we have practiced these examples together, students map additional samples in small groups of two or three, taking ten minutes to record their ideas (see fig.) . We often practice this step for a few weeks in combination with other small-group activities; I encourage them to take advantage of the group dynamic by having them compare, collate, and debate their individual interpretations. They also tend to correct each other when a suggestion is clearly unsupported by rest of the text.

Formal Writing Assignment

How do these activities translate into fewer "hit-and-run" quotations? The in-class writing culminates in a formal paper composed of a map and single paragraph. Students must select a passage no longer than two or three lines; map the passage by supplying a list of ten thorough points corresponding to each word, phrase, or punctuation point; and write a one-paragraph close reading. I liken this activity to a math problem by explaining that if the paragraph is their answer or solution, the map is like showing their work. I supply a detailed set of prescriptive steps: the paragraph must begin by introducing the text and their thesis (an interesting point about the passage), swiftly quote the passage, and conclude with a detailed analysis of the passage in support of their thesis. They often grasp the analytical portion of the paragraph better when I ask them to think of it as a focused, shorter version of their map in the form of a paragraph; I encourage them



Mapping literature informally
 Photo Courtesy of Laura Eidam

to use relevant portions of their map for the content. Despite these rules, the papers I receive vary widely in content and many students seem to enjoy the opportunity to generate what they perceive as a unique interpretation.

The key to this assignment is the lack of room for filler or unnecessary summary. Students may devote just one or two sentences to summarizing the passage or plot in their paragraph. To reinforce concise writing, I devote a day to work-shopping their papers—first close reading poor examples, and then addressing their drafts. For the second step, students outline their own or their partner's draft, identifying the purpose of each sentence in the margins. Much like the maps of their passages, these outlines provide them with a visual sense of where they may be summarizing too much and analyzing too little.

In addition to the workshop, students have the opportunity to revise for a higher grade—provided they visit me or the Writing Center. The beauty of this assignment is that the length permits us to work in depth on polishing their draft in a reasonable amount of time, with the typical appointment taking 15 – 30 minutes if they are working with me. Students who visit the Writing Center frequently report the same experience: they are surprised and excited that the tutor can understand their map and paragraph, despite the absence of excessive summary.

Applications Beyond Literature

As I tell my students, mapping is flexible enough that it can be applied to any assignment that calls for textual analysis. For example, I use a version of the formal assignment above in the composition classroom to assist students in selecting and responding to scholarly sources. They map and compose a one-paragraph rhetorical analysis of an author's thesis and later integrate the paragraph into a longer research paper. In turn, students, especially visual learners, can make the move from "hit-and-run" quoting to thoughtful analysis in a relatively short amount of time.

References

Graff, Gerald, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russel Durst. *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing with Readings*. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2012. Print.

Hemingway, Earnest. "Hills Like White Elephants." *The Story and Its Writer*. Ed. Ann Charters. 8th ed. Boston: Bedford St. Martin's. 539-542. Print.

Dr. Emily J. Beard
Dr. Jason Kahler
Co-Editors

Dylan Loga
Intern

Tim Inman
University Communication

SVSU Graphics Center
Printing

Call for Papers

The Editors of *Literacy Link* request submissions addressing the theme "Writing Resistance" for the Fall 2014 issue. We would welcome submissions from a broad range of topics, including but not limited to, the role of writing in social movements, protest writing, issues of agency, angry letters to the editor, historic texts of importance, pedagogy of protest, and encouraging writing in unenthusiastic subjects.

Literacy Link is a campus publication that began in the winter of 1992 with the support of Dr. Robert Yien and the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Founding editors Sally Cannon and Jenny Senft, in the first issue of *Literacy Link*, focused on three key areas of literacy: writing, reading, and thinking. Over the years, individuals from departments across campus have added to the conversation.

Articles for *Literacy Link* should run 500 to 1,500 words in length. Authors should follow either MLA or APA format.

Please submit articles to:
SVSU Department of English
Literacy Link
Emily J. Beard and Jason Kahler, Editors
7400 Bay Road Brown 326 University Center, MI 48710-0001

Submission deadline for the Fall 2014 issue is October 3, 2014