

Cartooning as a Creative Classroom Response: Picturing Emily Dickinson and her Poetry

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As a college literature teacher, my goal is to enable students to create their own meaning from their encounter with a text, respecting the text's sources, limits, contexts, and possibilities as well as their own. Fostering this creative response is among the greatest challenges and rewards of the profession. While teaching EN102: Literature to first-year cadets at the United States Military Academy (West Point) in the spring of 2015, I found one path to that reward through a two-part exercise that invited them to cartoon their responses to a poem by Emily Dickinson. The results not only fulfilled several of the course's objectives as well as my own, it also taught us all something about icons and closure in Dickinson's work. For students who were more inclined to resist poetry than to embrace it, the results also provided tangible proof of their encounter with a given Dickinson poem and the meaning they made in the process. Before sharing the exercise and its results, I will first provide some background on the unique teaching and learning environment at West Point, on the institutional vision for EN102, and on my individual experience of the course.

The Students

First-year cadets, known as "plebes," can be a tough crowd for the EN102 instructor; many new cadets believe they learned everything they needed to know about poetry in high school AP Literature. Few come to West Point to study the humanities; despite the Academy's

claim to offer a liberal education, STEM subjects dominate the core curriculum and draw the most majors. For most cadets, EN102 will be their only literature course, taken in the spring semester of their first year.¹

Even cadets who like to read and to write face obstacles in EN102. Most West Pointers are bright—the majority were high school valedictorians—but they compete in an environment that often values strength and endurance over academic intelligence. I know of no other college that has kicked off the first day of classes by requiring a 6:00 a.m. four-mile run for students and three-quarters of the faculty, who are also members of the military. The typical plebe takes at least 18 credits—including math, information technology, and a lab science—so the reading and writing required for their EN102 homework often falls to the bottom of an endless list of duties imposed not only by their other courses but also by their companies, coaches, and military command. Like many first-year college students, cadets often prefer disciplines where they can arrive at a “right” answer rather than having to maneuver their way through the paradoxes and ambiguities of literature. To compound the EN102 challenge, the classes are typically scheduled during the last two hours of the school day, after lunch and before two hours of sports, a mid-day period when most cadets, having been up since dawn, would prefer to be napping. Success depends first on keeping them awake. Nevertheless, the “situational awareness” they are trained to develop in hypothetical combat situations depends largely on their ability to close-read visual signs. Skills learned in EN102 could one day save their lives and the lives of their subordinates.

EN102 Objectives and Context

By the time they graduate from West Points, cadets are supposed to be able to “think and act creatively; recognize moral issues and apply ethical considerations in decision-making; listen,

read, speak and write effectively; and demonstrate the capability and desire to pursue progressive and intellectual development” (“Educating” 6). They are trained primarily as military leaders, and those who make it to commencement will be commissioned as first lieutenants responsible for managing platoons of enlisted men and women serving the army in various ways. EN102, required for all first-year students, sets its objectives to correspond with these lofty goals. Each year, the EN102 course director establishes a theme for the course along with required course-wide texts and protocols, provided in the form of a shell syllabus.

In spring 2015, Course Director Lieutenant Colonel Naomi Mercer set the theme as “utopia vs. reality” and required us to start with “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula Le Guin, followed by *The Handmaid’s Tale*, by Margaret Atwood, who came to speak to the cadets. In addition, we had to teach a unit on British and American poetry, and one play by Shakespeare. As part of a longstanding West Point tradition, each cadet had to perform thirty lines of Shakespeare from memory, and each instructor had to nominate one student for the Shakespeare monologue competition known as Academy Idol. In addition to the monologue performance, cadets had to submit three formal essays and two creative projects on prescribed dates. As provided by Lieutenant Colonel Mercer, the specific course objectives were to cultivate these qualities within cadets:

- Rigorous thinking; patience with ambiguity; and deep attention
- Creativity; a nimble imagination; a resilient mind; the willingness to take risks
- Ability to communicate clearly and persuasively
- A foundational knowledge of literary genres and terminology; an awareness of the influence of literary models and archetypes on human behavior

- [The] Understanding that college is not the end but the beginning of a project of lifelong learning.

These were tall orders for completion in forty fifty-five minute lessons by twenty-one instructors, most of whom were Army captains teaching for the first time. I was one of the eight civilian Ph.Ds. in the group. Most of us taught four sections, with around 16 cadets per section.

Finding Flexibility Within Constraints

I adapted the shell syllabus into my version of the course through collaboration with two colleagues, Dr. Brianne Bilsky and Captain Renée Farrar. I embraced their suggestion to bookend *The Handmaid's Tale* with the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, which then made *Macbeth*, alluded to in the early pages of *V*, a logical choice for the Shakespeare play. Examining the way one group's utopia can be another's dystopia would be good for U.S. Army officers, we agreed, and taking a deep dive into the 1980s might shed some insight on today's politics and culture for all of us. Although I have always included visual art in my literature courses—as a Romanticist I value the work of William Blake and James Gillray—I had never taught a graphic novel. Bilsky and Farrar introduced me to the work of comics theorist Scott McCloud, whose seminal 1993 *Understanding Comics* argues for comics as a profound human art form that “take[s] us easily into the realm of imagination,” invites us to consider the interplay between the visible and invisible, reminds us of the connection between word and image, and ultimately connects us (90-91,193-213). After we took a group of cadets to hear McCloud speak at the 92nd Street Y in New York, I began to think about how his claims for comics related to my own claims for poetry.

The poetry unit was our biggest syllabus challenge: we had ten lessons to skate over the forms and history of British, American, and Anglophone verse, forcing us to be ruthlessly selective. Like the Shakespeare monologue, the poetry-unit requirement had its roots in tradition: not that long ago West Point's only required literature course focused exclusively on the recitation and transcription of poetry. Our greater flexibility for the poetry unit paradoxically became a constraint. We started with some early modern sonnets followed by a smattering of Phillis Wheatley; some of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*; Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"; bits from Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson; a few World War I poems; Yeats and Frost; and one poem each from Elizabeth Bishop, Allen Ginsberg, and Billy Collins. Without stretching too far, we could keep the thematic thread of utopia and dystopia in view as we emphasized the visual images engendered by the words of these texts. I launched the poetry unit with a video (Fig. 1) of cartoonist Lynda Barry discussing poetry and using Dickinson as one of her main examples. In addition to unobtrusively suggesting the aesthetic links between comics and poetry, Barry's video reinforced in detail the value of memorization, a challenge cadets knew was looming in the subsequent Shakespeare unit. It also served my larger aim for the course by suggesting to cadets through Barry's voice that reading and writing could help preserve their sanity and sense of self when they left the Academy and got deployed to a combat zone or stationed at a remote base. This was not a message that most could hear at this early moment in their development as soldiers, but at least I could plant the seed.



Figure 1: YouTube video of cartoonist Linda Barry

Picturing Dickinson

I love teaching poetry, but the lesson on Emily Dickinson's work worried me; I had never taught nor formally studied Dickinson's work, but I knew her as a deep reader and original poet whose status in American verse was equal to Whitman's. I wanted cadets to see her as an artist rather than as the stereotypically depressed and agoraphobic spinster. Challenging gender stereotypes at an institution still fueled largely by hyper-masculinity was one of my personal aims for the course, especially because the Army was in the process of granting full equality to women by allowing them to serve in combat roles, a decision that sparked some surprising debates among cadets. I was happy to see that [biography of Dickinson](#) on the Poetry

Foundation's website suggests that Dickinson's avoidance of society and of the roles of wife and mother was an "eminently practical" choice for a person who wanted above all to be a writer.

The selections from Dickinson in our anthology were both familiar and foreign to me, rather like comics and the concept of graphic narrative. As I read and re-read the poems, I began to appreciate their deliberately visual qualities not only in terms of their images but also in terms of their arrangements of words and punctuation and all the mediation that had taken place between Dickinson's composition and my reception of her work at that moment. On our syllabus, we had scheduled four Dickinson poems at mid-semester on the same day a formal graded essay was due, with a vague hope that her verses would lend themselves to some creative in-class exercise even if the cadets had not prepared by reading in advance.² When the idea of cartooning in the Dickinson class occurred to me, it seemed potentially reductive or infantilizing until the scholarship of Martha Nell Smith gave me the courage to proceed.

In Smith's essay "The Poet as Cartoonist," coincidentally published in the same year as *Understanding Comics*, Smith argues that Dickinson's collage letters and "pictorial lyrics" are the poet's creative responses to her own reading (66). Examining a letter from Dickinson that includes an image of Little Nell's death clipped from her father's copy of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Smith claims the poet subordinates the novel by Charles Dickens to her "own holographic response" (80). Addressing other ways Dickinson makes something new from the texts she reads, Smith invokes Roland Barthes's suggestion that texts are "'methodological fields,' which can be 'experienced only in an activity of production.'" (88). Barthes and Smith reinforced my pedagogical belief in exercises that compel students to form creative responses to their reading, a belief that had formerly taken shape as assignments to create Twitter dialogues between

characters, to perform skits, or to compose essays. Asking students to make something of their own from the texts they encounter enhances their comprehension and their retention while also empowering them as active readers. Cartooning with low-tech pencil and paper, I came to believe, would enable cadets to reenact Dickinson’s self-authorizing process in another medium. In this way, the in-class assignment could support the course objectives of deep attention, creativity, and understanding of literary genres—in this case poem, cartoon, and comics—in terms of both their connections and distinctions.

The Lesson Plan

My lesson moved in two stages of drawing, allowing each cadet to respond to one of four poems by Dickinson on the syllabus. The first stage was an exercise in cartooning, focusing on the icon that McCloud calls “amplification through simplification” (30). The second part was an exercise in drawing comics, defined by McCloud as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information an/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). We had cartooned in class on the first day, when cadets read Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” and then drew the cave individually before working in small groups to put their collaborative version on the board.³ We had also looked at some on-line comics based on *The Handmaid’s Tale* and compared their interpretation of the printed text to our own. The Dickinson lesson was the first time I asked them to create comics themselves. My plan led the cadets to the task gradually, so that by the time they got to the hardest part, they were invested.

Cadets began the class seated in four groups of three to five students each, depending on the size of the section. I began by talking to the class as a whole and inviting them to share any previous experience with Dickinson. Those who had studied Dickinson in high school presented

her as the depressed eccentric and crazy recluse. Comparing the familiar [daguerreotype of the poet](#) with the Emily Dickinson doll I had brought to class (Fig. 2), we discussed how and why historical figures got reduced to caricatures.



Figure 2: Emily Dickinson doll from the Little Thinkers series.

Despite the visual connections to the “real” image of Dickinson—hair parted in the middle and pulled to the nape of the neck, the ribbon necklace, the dark eyes, and rather large nose—the doll is nothing more than a commercialized three-dimensional cartoon that seemed initially at least to reduce Dickinson rather than “stripping down [her image] down to its essential meaning” and “amplifying” her, as McCloud claims cartoons do (30). And yet, in its simplicity it also became a “vacuum into which [the students’] identity and awareness [were] pulled” (McCloud 36). As I brought the doll closer to the students, they saw it not only a testament to the poet’s reputation and fame but also as a vehicle through which to wonder about the person represented in the more realistic source image. I suggested possible revisions to their ideas of the poet’s sad life and

single-minded obsession with death as I offered some additional historical context for the uninitiated before assigning one poem to each group.

The cadets' first task was to read the poem silently as I distributed the tools. Each cadet got a [blank three-panel comic template](#), which I had downloaded from [printablepaper.net](#), copied, and cut into strips. After a few minutes, with no discussion, I gave the following instructions at timed intervals:

- In the first panel, draw yourself in 30 seconds.
- In the second panel, draw Emily Dickinson in 30 seconds.
- In the third panel, draw an image to represent the poem you just read, also in 30 seconds.

This exercise served as the warm-up, getting all the “I’m not creative” and “I can’t draw” complaints on the table and out of the way. It was a bit of a trick, having them start with themselves to assure a response before moving to Dickinson and to the poem, but it also put them in the mode of risk-taking consistent with the course objectives.

Several results confirmed McCloud’s theory that viewers read themselves into iconic cartoon figures, whose form becomes a concept for what cannot be seen but only imagined (36). As suggested in Carolyn’s work in [Fig. 5](#) and Mark’s in [Fig. 8](#), more than a few Dickinsons had features in common with the cadets’ cartooned self-portrait. With the exception of Carolyn’s, nearly all the Dickinsons showed her with a bun in various locations around her two-dimensional head, even though the poet’s bun is invisible in her portrait and only visible in a rear-view of the doll. The bun too was a point of identification for cadets, as a tightly drawn bun is one of the most common hairstyles among West Point women, who have to comply with strict hairstyle regulations. The third frames about the poem displayed a range of icons: fire and ice ([Fig. 3](#)),

frogs in bogs ([Fig. 5](#)), books, horses, and boats ([Fig. 7](#)), and grim reapers and tombstones ([Fig. 9](#)). Each was a testament to the power of Dickinson's words to create visual images in spite of, or perhaps because of, their frequently jarring juxtaposition, framing and punctuation. Walking through the groups, I queried various aspects of the work without judgment and encouraged cadets to share their results with each other.

After part one was complete, the groups discussed their assigned poem together, describing their own understandings and interpretations and distinguishing between narrative and lyrical moments, an exercise carried over from our earlier reading of "Goblin Market." I met briefly with each group to pose questions and point out words or images whose significance they might have overlooked. For this part, I showed them the [lexicon](#) from the online *Emily Dickinson Archive*, useful for words such as "advertise" (from line four of "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"), which takes on additional connotations of inquiry and probing in the meaning from Dickinson's 1844 *Webster's*. Those cadets who thought they had understood the poem the first time found some impetus to take another look.

After ten minutes of group discussion, I gave them another blank, three-panel strip and asked them to cartoon either the poem itself or the story of their encounter with the poem in ten minutes. Only a few took that latter "meta" alternative, as seen in Part II by Jacob, which captures the move from confusion to comprehension in his experience of "After great pain, a formal feeling comes" ([Fig. 4](#)). For those ten minutes, I heard no complaints about drawing; in fact I seldom had the room so quiet for such an extended period. The energy was palpable; no one was sleeping. Consistent with the course objectives, attention was deep.

As the sample results offered here suggest, the cartoons demonstrated readings both accurate and insightful. The three-panel structure compelled them to see a beginning, middle, and end to the poems. As McCloud suggests, the gutters between panels offered space to imagine the closure that can be elusive in a Dickinson poem. Most notable was the individuality of each effort; no two were similar let alone alike, a rare outcome in an environment that often punishes nonconformity. They also proved that the exercise had compelled students to think creatively on their own, though informed by the small group discussions. Carolyn, working on “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” took the poem’s mention of “June” as a reference to weddings, building on a point we had discussed in relation to the real name of the narrator from *The Handmaid’s Tale*. A swimmer who worked out her stand on feminism through many of her course essays, Carolyn focused on Dickinson’s views on marriage, making the boastful bog frogs into brides (Fig. 6). Conor identified with a happy reader in “There is no frigate like a book” (Fig. 8), marking small but distinctive differences among the eyes of himself, his Dickinson, and his reader. Mark took note of the schoolyard children “in the ring,” representing the possible link to “Ring around the Rosie” and its legendary origins in deaths caused by a British plague (Fig. 10). Few would have won prizes for artistic merit, but each captured and conveyed something unique about the student and about the text. The cartoons’ existence was material evidence of a connection between the two.

The 55-minute class concluded with cadets sharing their work within their groups. Each group then selected one cadet who used his or her cartoon to interpret the poem for the whole class. In a 75-minute class, I might have rearranged the groups to facilitate smaller discussions of all four poems at once to find points of synthesis between them. Inviting the students to revise

their comics after such a discussion might also have produced more refined comments about Dickinson's poetry.

The students took pride and pleasure in the cartoons. I did not grade them, but I scanned them all and posted them on Blackboard. In the next class, I praised the results and gave the students a few minutes to look through the submissions. Although they pretended not to know what I was making such a fuss about, more than a few inserted their cartoons into the transparent covers of their binders, keeping them visible to themselves and to their classmates for the rest of the course.

Later in the term, when we were discussing McCloud's claims about icons and gutters, cadets reflected back on this exercise and better understood how McCloud's theories translated to practice. As we approached *V for Vendetta*, they had a much better sense of the complex challenges and choices involved in creating and reading comics. Most importantly to me, they gained active appreciation for the poetry of Emily Dickinson, having approached it in a way that rendered it accessible and enjoyable while respecting its challenges for readers. In the context of West Point's academic and course objectives, they had focused their attention and thought creatively about the relationship of reader to text, of word to image, of form to content, of poem to comics. I would not hesitate to repeat it in different classrooms with different poems or short prose selections.

Appendix: Cartoon Examples

Fig. 3 Part 1: Jacob, Emily Dickinson, “After great pain a formal feeling comes”

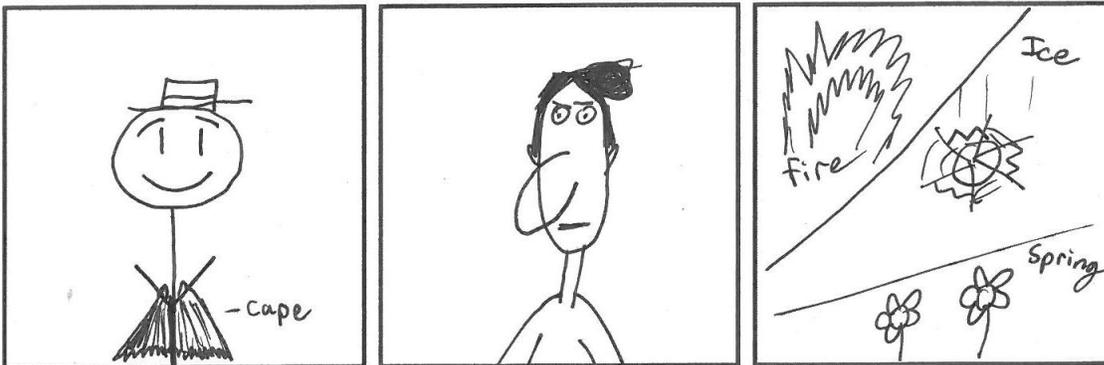


Fig. 4 Part 2: Jacob’s encounter with the poem.

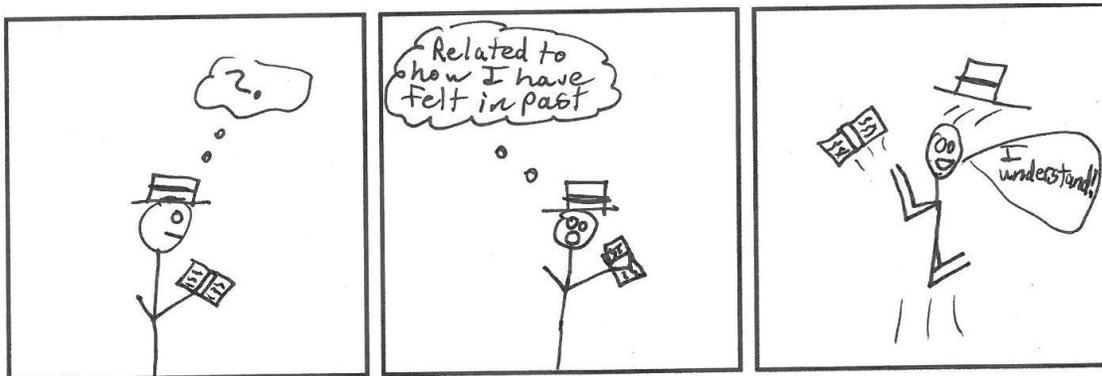


Fig. 5. Part 1: Carolyn, Emily Dickinson, “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?”



Fig. 6. Part 2: Carolyn’s reading of “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?”

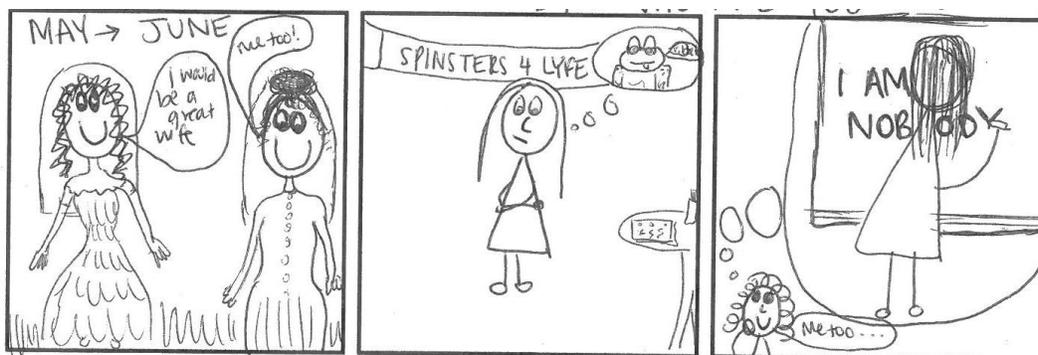


Fig. 7 Part 1: Conor, Emily Dickinson, “There is no frigate like a book”

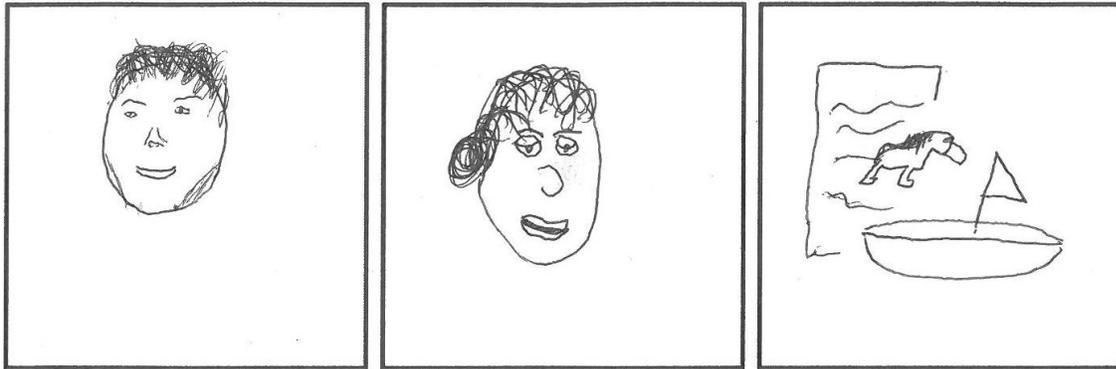


Fig. 8. Part 2: Conor’s reading of “There is no frigate like a book.”

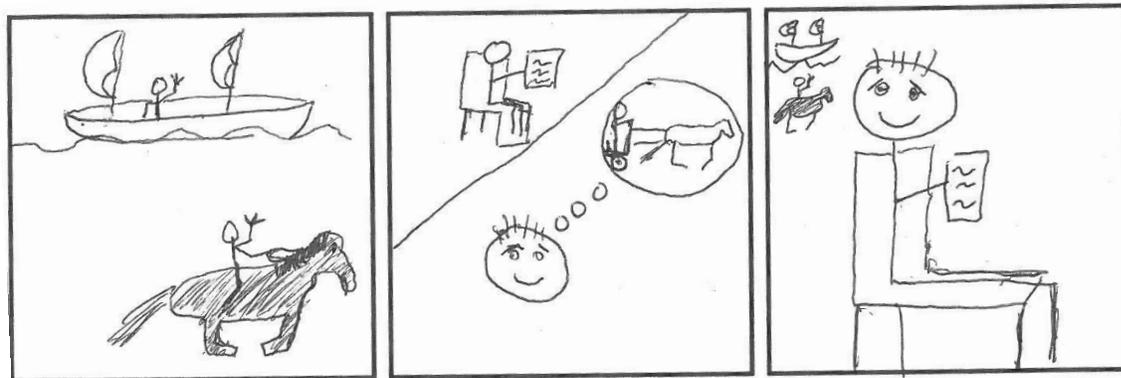


Fig. 9. Mark, Emily Dickinson, "Because I could not stop for death."

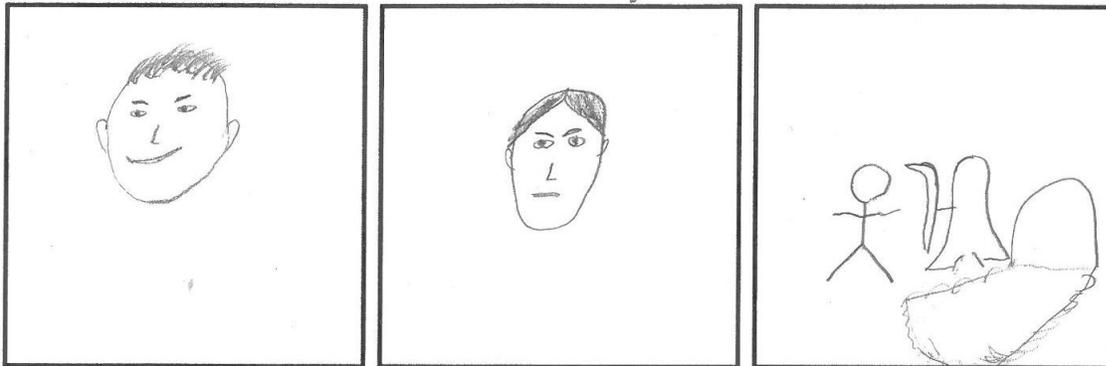
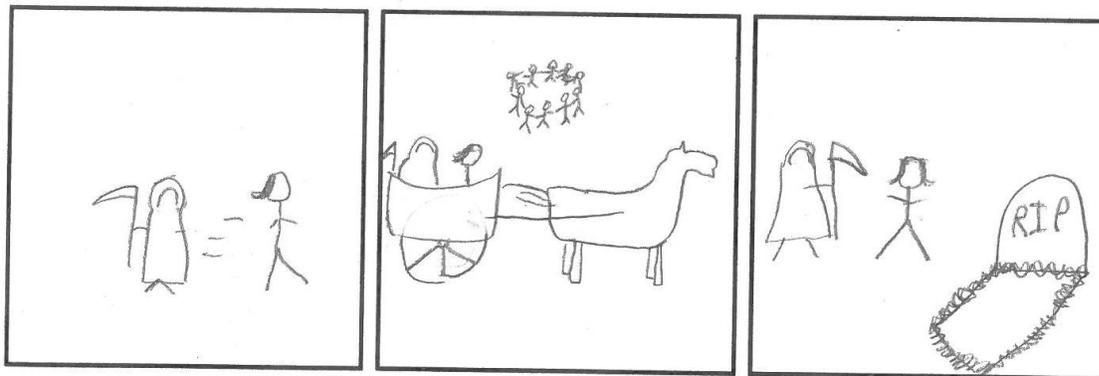


Fig. 10. Mark's reading of "Because I could not stop for death."



Notes

¹ A third course EN302, Advanced Composition through Cultural Studies formerly exposed cadets to a region's literature as it tested their writing skills in their third year, but that requirement was dropped from the new curriculum beginning with the class of 2019.

² The four poems were "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" "There is no frigate like a book" and "Because I could not stop for death," all included in our anthology, *Literature: The Human Experience* (Abcarian 1223, 672, 3,1225)

³ West Point cadets "take boards" in a way that other college students might not; it's part of yet another longstanding classroom tradition there.

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