

## Theme-Based Approaches to Teaching the Sophomore Literature Survey

**Ellen Arnold, Linda E. Martin, and Rebecca Hamill Truax**  
*Coastal Carolina University*

At Coastal Carolina University, English faculty offer a thematic alternative to the traditional core literature survey. That course is English 205, “Literature and Culture,” which aims to “examine compelling themes, styles, and cultural arguments within their literary, historical, and philosophical contexts” (Coastal 405). Faculty structure their courses, choose their readings, and design assignments and student assessments according to themes of their own choosing, but all sections work toward the same goals: encouraging students to understand literature as a cultural production and become more aware of the crucial role that literature plays in the creation and transmission of cultural meaning.

The benefits of a theme-based, culture-focused literature course are numerous and quite wide-ranging. First, in our experience, choosing readings and organizing the course by specific themes allows multiple ways to appeal to non-English majors, the population that makes up the majority of students in English 205. Most basically, students are more likely to self-select into courses that are geared toward their own academic or personal interests. Thus, science majors for instance who choose a section that focuses on science fiction already have a good reason to be excited about the class even before it starts. So the course asks students to use their strengths and interests as ways into the literary texts, rather than asking them to check those parts of their

intellectual selves at the door. What we have seen is that this self-selection, when it happens, results in a high level of student investment and engagement in the readings and the course. Paradoxically, perhaps, this initial personal engagement is what eventually allows students to learn more about cultures previously beyond their own experience and, by stepping outside of that familiar “frame,” to gain valuable insights about their own culture.

On the practical level of student learning goals and outcomes, although there is significant challenging literary content in each English 205 section, the thematic organization means that the course itself is more concerned with developing common skills and ways of thinking than with teaching content, a shift that seems entirely appropriate for a course that helps students fulfill the core requirement for a goal broadly defined as “Knowledge of Humanistic Concepts” (Coastal 115). The commonalities that bind the various sections of the course together are not shared readings, but similar approaches to reading and interpretation. So, for instance, the students in our courses wrestle with the idea that the meaning of a text depends on context, leading to a profound understanding of the difference between plot summary and interpretation – a crucial intellectual leap for beginning- to intermediate-college students. We also note that while students in some sections may be introduced to literary theory or other “lenses” through which to interpret their readings, the most important skill they are learning is how to apply an analytical tool, any analytical tool, to a text. What’s more, they learn that though one text may foster multiple interpretations, it is not true that all interpretations are equally valid. Understanding that the validity of an interpretation must depend on its basis in evidence from the text is a habit of mind with wide-ranging value. And the recognition of common themes and meaning across readings and cultures encourages students to recognize and articulate connections between texts

that might not have otherwise occurred to them. So the focus moves from learning about a specific literary period or canon to learning transferable practices of close, contextualized reading, careful textual analysis, evidence-based interpretation, and even cross-textual synthesis.<sup>1</sup>

Shifting the focus of the sophomore introduction to literature away from traditional nationality- and period-based surveys has had a liberating effect for instructors and students alike. A sampling of titles of recently offered sections shows the variety of themes that have sprung out of this change in approach. “Combat Literature” includes readings that span the Great War to Iraq; “A Thousand and One Nights: Text, Film, and Fantasy” explores ways in which the familiar frame narrative has been told and retold up to this very day. Other classes have explored “Gender and Literature,” “Literature and Gossip,” and “Utopian / Dystopian Literature.” Some sections, such as “G’Day, Mate! Cultural Cringe and Australian Identity” and “Women of the Harlem Renaissance,” concentrate on specific nationalities and time periods, but in ways that encourage students to recognize the interrelatedness of literature and cultural context.<sup>2</sup>

The thematic approach challenges us to rethink the ways we structure our teaching, from the selection of readings, to the ways we employ class meetings, to the methods we use to assess our students’ learning. A closer look at three course sections – “Literature and the Culture of Speculative Fiction” (aka Science Fiction), offered by Linda Martin; “Children and Literature,” taught by Ellen Arnold; and “Food, Literature and Culture,” designed by Rebecca Hamill Truax – suggests various ways to address these challenges, using our own combination of readings, teaching methods, class exercises, and writing assignments.

## Linda Martin: Literature, Culture, and Speculative Fiction

Speculative fiction, also known as science fiction, is “the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places” (Gunn 6). As the first CCU lecturer to offer a course using science fiction texts, Linda knew she wanted to create an academic environment that would be intellectually stimulating for students, give them access to the cultural norms situated in those times and places, and enable them to make cultural connections between the past, present and future. Realizing “we frequently learn more from books that are fun to read...since storytelling and flow are frequently the basis of enjoyment” (Passell 70), Linda spent several weeks reading the selections from several anthologies and ultimately selected *The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction*.

Linda usually begins her semester with a fairly difficult contemporary text by Ted Chaing, “Exhalation,” which is narrated by a mechanical being who looks at his world as it is dying due to residents experimenting with science for the sake of scientific advances with no real thought for the long-term outcome. A first reading usually leaves students with the impression that the text is simply another apocalyptic tale. A closer reading done during class time opens students’ minds to discussions on self-awareness: “‘Where did we come from?’...[Our] brains contained no histories older than those found in our libraries....I was an everted person, with my tiny, fragmented body situated at the center of my own distended brain” (Chaing 746-747). The narrator’s statement “Contemplate the marvel that is existence....As I am inscribing these words

I am doing the same” (756) leads to online discussion questions and begins what becomes a semester-long routine: online discussions.

The English 205 sequence of classes and most English composition or literature classes begin with student responses that tend to be plot summary rather than literary analysis. In her online discussion prompts Linda requires students to engage in critical analysis of a text, rather than simply reacting to a text. One way Linda creates more complex prompts is aligning fiction texts from the anthology with critical articles about the texts or articles about genres, motifs, etc. She has found this blending of fiction texts and non-fiction articles helps students reach an even deeper understanding and appreciation for the story(ies).

For example, the article “Embodiment and Technicity,” provides various theories concerning the connection between humans and the science and technology they create: “[T]echnology is on the inside just as much as it is on the outside: we are not masters but co-conspirators with our technical systems; we use technology, but it uses us too, in ways that are very difficult to gauge” (Dougherty 43). Students respond to the story and the article based on prompts like “If humans morph with AI (artificial intelligence) will they still be the masters of technology or will technology become the masters of humans?” Most students like this beginning route to literary ownership even if they feel overwhelmed due to the gap between what they are used to reading and what is standard in texts that require higher order thinking.

Some science fiction texts, like some mundane texts, are easy to read and understand, but many science fiction texts, such as “The Game of Rat and Dragon” are filled with unfamiliar scientific jargon: “It must have been pretty good to have been an ancient man....They didn’t have to planoform....They didn’t have to dodge the Rats or play the game. They couldn’t have

invented pinlighting” (Smith 311). Students often find texts frustrating to read because of the dense or unfamiliar language. This frustration can be also be found with words that are used in unfamiliar ways as seen in *Fahrenheit 451* where the term “firefighter” does not mean to eradicate fires but to eradicate knowledge (Bradbury). One way to help students overcome this gap in language comprehension has been to dust off and tweak an older assignment: the word study. Students note five problematic words per week and write what takes place in their mental lexicon. After they discuss the definitions they have created in small groups, the students combine their in-class results with an out-of-class assignment that requires them to find the actual definition (which often requires looking at several types of dictionaries), and to use the word in a newly created sentence. After a few exercises on how to annotate the more unfamiliar tech phrases like “stimsim” (Gibson 558) or “cytocellular macroassemblies” (Stross 729) students, in addition to increasing their vocabulary, begin to understand that all texts, including science fiction texts, require close readings for a full understanding and appreciation.

About midterm students self-populate themselves into groups and are given The Decades Project, which combines science fiction texts with the culture of discrete decades in recent history. In addition to using sources from the library’s cache of books, videos, and databases, each group member self-selects a short story from the textbook as well as a novel from the decade chosen. The choice of novel can come from books Linda brings to class or books students self-select that meet her guidelines. When individual readings and research are combined into the group pool, each group becomes expert on a specific decade through the use of GERMS – Government, Economy or Ecology, Religion, Military, and Society – a concept adapted from

Tori McClure's *A Pearl in the Storm*. In general, letters in the acronym correspond to students' major or areas of interest:

- “G” – Students majoring in history, government, or foreign language become experts in the way government entities react to changes occurring in the United States during a specific decade.
- “E” – Business or marketing majors explore economic issues and the ways money is made and lost through a 10-year micro-culture. Students in the marine sciences have the ability to change the “E” in economy to “E” for ecology with some surprising results which leads them to research the effects of manufacturing during a specific decade and what happens to the environment when the products manufactured are no longer useful.
- “R” – Students immersed in the study of philosophy or sociology tend to gravitate toward the religion component of GERMS. They explore how belief – or non-belief – in a higher being influences the way individuals, communities, and governments react to cultural changes that occur.
- “M” – Students majoring in the sciences generally explore the military segment of GERMS since most Research and Development funds for new technology originate with military funding.
- “S” – Students in all remaining majors or interests research society and any and all of its many avenues beginning with art and ending with the evolution of zoos.

Students organize themselves into groups with each group member specializing in one aspect of GERMS. Once these roles are determined, the method for presenting the decade begins. Most groups decide to present the most interesting aspects of their decades in video format. Video allows group members to use the technology tools they like and to morph their research into fun and sometimes-quirky scenarios.

One group of students elected to explore very early science fiction vis-à-vis *The War of the Worlds* (Wells). This group did a great job of explaining the political comments found in the original text. Another group from a different semester decided to present its decade – the 1950s – live. Although the novel the group selected to read was *The War of the Worlds*, this group wanted to bring the novel from the 1880s into the 1950s. The proposal they created showed clear attention to detail and offered solid reasoning on how the issues faced by Wells were not dissimilar to the issues faced during the Cold War. On the day of the presentation, the movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was playing in the classroom and one by one each group member began arriving at the local drive-in in his or her homemade cardboard car. The group did an amazing job of addressing issues from the 50s: consumerism, the war in Korea and the issue of segregation. This presentation provided a venue that allowed members of the student audience to see for themselves the negative effect change can have on people living in different places and in different times.<sup>3</sup>

All literature has a place in our lives, and a text, even when placed off earth, or on a different earth, or in a time not yet realized, reflects the complexities of the time in which it is written. The Grand Master of Science Fiction, Robert Heinlein, once said: “science fiction, even the corniest of it, even the most outlandish of it, no matter how badly it’s written, has a distinct



therapeutic value because ALL of it has its primary postulate that the world does change” (qtd. in Landon 61). One of Linda’s stock statements at the beginning and end of each semester is: If you want to learn about battles, read history books. If you want to learn the truth of a time period look at the art: the music, paintings, sculpture, music, and literature of a time period. Learn about the actual people. One way to help students find this literary connection between people and the cultures they create is through the lens of science fiction.

## **Ellen Arnold: Literature, Culture, and Children**

Ellen’s most recent Literature and Culture sections have focused on the theme of Children and Literature. The primary text for the class is Griffith and Frey’s *Classics of Children’s Literature*, and readings from that text include *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *Treasure Island*, and *Charlotte’s Web*, along with various fairy- and folktales and poetry. But this is not “kiddie lit.” Through guided instruction on close reading, weekly online writing, some student-chosen readings, and a final group presentation, students learn to read literature as cultural artifact.

Starting with fairytales, the first part of the course invites students to look at familiar tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Three Little Pigs” as if they were encountering them for the first time. Christine A. Jones and Jennifer Schacker, in the introduction to their very useful anthology of fairytales and criticism, describe this kind of reading as a way of making familiar tales strange; rather than reading simply for the predictable moral at the end, students learn to pay “heightened attention to detail,” to “focus on texts’ potential ambiguities and

internal contradictions,” and to explore “intertextuality,” or the relationship between texts (26). Readers begin to see a literary work as a creation and a recreation of a particular time and place, carrying within it the values of that culture. As Maria Tatar has written, “Our deepest desires as well as our most profound anxieties enter the folkloric bloodstream and remain in it through stories that find favor with a community of listeners or readers” (xiii). Students in this section of ENGL 205 learn to ask not just “What does this work mean to me?,” or even “What might the work have meant to the author?,” but “What does this work tell me about the culture in which it was created?” and “How does the text recreate a particular time and place in all its richness and complexity?”

An excellent exercise to encourage this kind of careful, archaeological approach to reading is to compare classic, familiar tales with less familiar retellings from another culture. For instance, the class might read Perrault’s version of “Little Red Riding-hood,” paying particular attention to the areas where the story invites readers to read beyond the predictable “stranger danger” moral: Red Riding-hood’s extreme gullibility and naiveté, the disturbing sexual nature of the wolf’s bedroom conversation with her (students are especially surprised to read that Red not only climbs into bed with her “grandmother,” but also undresses first), and the overt moral that Perrault appended to the tale, which speaks not of children in general, but of “pretty, well-bred, and genteel” young girls who are at risk of being gobbled up by the “charming, . . . tame, pleasant, and gentle” wolf (Perrault 373). By paying attention to these details and the historical period in which Perrault was writing, readers begin to see that this is a tale with a meaning particular to the court of Louis XIV, when young women were at risk of being seduced and ruined by courtly lovers who did not have their best interests in mind.

Next, the class turns to a retelling of the tale from a very different cultural context, Patricia McKissack's lovely picture book, *Flossie and the Fox*. McKissack introduces the tale as part of an oral Southern Black tradition that she inherited from her grandfather. Flossie lives with her grandmother in the rural South and speaks in a readable version of Southern Black dialect. In this version, Flossie must deliver a basket of eggs from her grandmother's house to a neighbor's, heeding her grandmother's warning that an egg-stealing fox is in the neighborhood. "How do a fox look?," Flossie asks her grandmother. "I disremember ever seeing one" (McKissack). So far, the plot is familiar, but Flossie herself is quite different from Perrault's Red Riding-hood: though she has never before seen a fox in person, she is quickly able to identify him; she interprets him correctly as untrustworthy and vain; and she not only protects the basket of eggs from him, but uses his vanity against him to bring him perilously close to becoming foxhound bait. By the end of the book, McKissack's Flossie reminds us more of the familiar tricksters in African-American folk tales than of Perrault's gullible Red Riding-hood. Like Brer Rabbit and other tricksters, Flossie "succeed[s] by outsmarting or outthinking [her] opponent" (Harris).

Written in different times and places, reflecting the very different cultures in which they were created, the two tales cause readers to reach radically different interpretations. Where Perrault's tale warns naïve young women of the dangers that come from consorting with wolves, McKissack's tale encourages children to use their powers of observation and intelligence to find their way out of a difficult situation. Thus the class begins to see that literature is capable of transmitting complex meanings and cultural values across time and distance, if it is read carefully.

During the second half of the course, students are invited to apply their knowledge of careful reading to a longer text of their own selection.<sup>4</sup> Students choose from a selection of about eight possible titles, all of which fit into the course theme of Children and Literature. In the spring of 2013, the titles included Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2009), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2010), Hannah Tinti's *The Good Thief* (2009), and Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2007). Students are placed in groups with other students who have chosen the same book, and they are responsible for reading the book by midterm. Then, after midterm, students complete a weekly online discussion forum in which they share their responses to specific questions with the other members of their group. During the last two weeks of class, each group gives a presentation of the book to the class, and individual students write reviews of their books.

The cultural settings for these books range from New York City just after 9-11 (Foer) to Nazi Germany (Zusak), from a contemporary Spokane Indian reservation (Alexie) to the northeastern United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Tinti). The class has a wide variety of contexts and themes to choose from; students are told to choose the book that interests them the most, and to research the books and read reviews of them before making their choice. The result has been that students are engaged with this group project to an unusually high degree.

Online group discussion forums give students a chance to exchange ideas with others in their group, and they allow assessment of how well students are applying the concepts from the first part of the semester to their individual reading. For example, students are asked to comment on the setting of their book: "What are some specific cultural values, anxieties, hopes, or fears

that you find in the book?” the prompt asks. One student responded with a discussion of the cultural context for Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*:

To the Indians of the reservation, it seems as though they are all destined to live a life of poverty. Being trapped on the reservation could be seen as a cultural fear. Indians use to be masters of their own domains and nomads as it says in the book, but now they are all trapped on the reservations. Junior is following in his ancestors footsteps by branching out and going new places.

This student’s response (transcribed as originally written for an informal response) not only shows a firm grasp of the concept of cultural setting, but also demonstrates an ability to understand how that context influences the plot and character development within the book.

Another student commented that her book (Zusak’s *The Book Thief*) gave her a new appreciation of the moral complexity of German society during the second world war, a new realization that not all Germans supported Hitler, though they may have feared his power, and an appreciation for the difficult conflicts faced by the main characters. Both of these students are reading in a fairly complex way. They are reading within a specific cultural context, paying attention to culture-specific values and meanings, and perhaps most importantly noticing ways in which the text contradicts their expectations.

Another goal of this group reading exercise is to challenge students to make connections between readings that they discussed in depth earlier in the semester, and their own individual book. One weekly prompt asked students to focus on the theme of childhood in their book, keeping in mind what they had already learned from their class reading: “What is the role of the child or childhood in your book? Do you find any of the themes or motifs we’ve discussed in

class?” This kind of synthesis, of course, is a higher order task, and one that is sometimes difficult to teach to beginning college students, but some students accomplished this goal admirably. One student saw the theme of the hero’s round (which the class had studied in reading *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*) in Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book*, and focused his response on the role of the mentor or guide. Just as the Cheshire Cat serves as a guide for Alice, this student argued, so does Silas (a gruff but surprisingly kindly vampire) stand as a mentor for the orphan Bod, who must learn and develop through his experiences growing up in the graveyard. Another student made an explicit connection between the class’s earlier reading of Blake’s “two contrary states” of Innocence and Experience with her book, Tinti’s *The Good Thief*:

Ren represents the child/childhood. Tom and Benjamin use him in order to make money and scheme people. . . . This reminded me of "Chimney Sweeper" because children were used in order to make money for parents/adults. They did the low, dirty jobs kind of like Ren who has to dig up dead bodies and scheme people just to make a few dollars. There's definitely a transition between innocence and experience for Ren.

Both of these students are making connections between their chosen book and earlier texts from the course. They are finding ways to see their texts as “retellings” of earlier texts, and they are listening to the resonance that is created when several texts “talk” to one another.

At the end of the semester, each group presents their book to the rest of the class. This final group project represents the culmination of the semester-long exploration of how to read. Students’ main goal for their presentation is to introduce their book to the rest of the class in a

way that is engaging and creative and will make the class want to read it. They receive instruction to steer away from pure plot summary and focus on analysis and interpretation, sometimes even evaluation and critique. Finally, each presentation should include some sort of visual, interactive, or multi-media element, a representation of the spirit of the book within the context of their semester-long discussion of the representation of children in literature. The presentations vary widely, but almost invariably succeed in engaging the small group of presenters and the larger class in a detailed, complex, resonant discussion of each text:

- One group created a Facebook page for Oskar Schell (the main character and narrator of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*), complete with biographical information and life events; “likes” such as links to *National Geographic*, Jane Goodall and Steven Hawking; a map of New York City marked with Oskar’s stops on his quest to find the key; and “friends,” including many of the Blacks visited by Oskar on his quest.
- Another group presented a mock trial of the main characters from *The Good Thief*, who are accused of stealing bodies from a graveyard. Group members played the roles of the judge, the accused, and the prosecuting attorney. The audience played the role of jury, deciding whether the characters were guilty based on the evidence supplied and the laws against body snatching in the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Yet another group created a striking poster that illustrated the point of view of *The Book Thief* as it is narrated in first person by Death. But rather than illustrate death as the stereotypical grim reaper, they portrayed him as an accordion player with a mirror for a face to illustrate the close relationship that Death has with each of the characters, especially with young Liesel Meminger.

Each of these projects takes the kind of “archaeological” approach to reading that the course attempts to cultivate all semester. Each presents the book as an artifact that explores the rich suggestiveness of the role of the child in literature. And each evokes an understanding of literature as a vehicle for the hopes and fears, the dreams, desires, and anxieties of the culture at large.

## **Rebecca Hamill Truax: Literature, Culture, and Food**

It is difficult, at first, for students to define culture in literature because of the varied talismans or cultural markers that do not seem quite so obvious to beginning students who are new to using an analytical approach to reading. Since the texts change each time the course is taught, using a variety of media as an attempt to keep students interested is helpful, especially for the non-majors who do not see themselves as readers.

The framework or structure of this course is based on four cultural anthropologists: Clifford Geertz, Edward Said, Malidoma Somé, and Massimo Montanari. Since this is a sophomore survey course, a few very basic concepts of these four theorists provide students with a “cultural lens” which enables them to critically examine literary texts. This is a literature-based course, and we are trying to get students to read critically, so a theoretical framework allows for using a wider variety of texts and genres. This approach also allows each instructor to use his/her own strengths in teaching literature within a field of study and should be seen as a one-size-fits-all pedagogy for teaching Literature and Culture that can easily be adapted to any instructor’s preference to literary movements.



There is, perhaps because of the thematic content of food and cuisine, a tendency to view this course, at first, as a more personal, non-academic class. Food, after all, is highly personal as we take the physical food grown from the land (the outer), often prepare it in the same way our parents did, and then ingest it (the inner). Food becomes part of us in a kind of transformation, nurturing our bodies and teaching us about our own cultures. By setting up a theoretical cultural framework, students quickly see that this is not merely a cooking course in which we study recipes. We might consider the way recipes are passed down and recorded from generation to generation through literature; we also consider the regional ingredients available, modes of preparation, and even how we eat (whether with chopsticks, a fork and knife, or our fingers), which is an important cultural marker that needs a closer look through a cultural lens.

Nowhere is the connection between culture and literature more evident than in how we eat and how we tell stories. Both are highly ritualized behaviors that hold a culture together. Food in literature is highly symbolic. It is a powerful identity marker in terms of class, gender, and culture. Food in literature reveals more about culture not only through the symbolic value of the food itself, but in the preparation, rituals, and celebrations of the family and community that surround it. Food, or the lack of it, establishes the strong communal bond within a culture.

This course begins with an online blog assignment based on French writer Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's most famous quote in *The Physiology of Taste: Or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, "Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are" (3). Students consider their own heritage and describe their favorite meal. They explain why they think this meal makes them unique or interesting, or perhaps defines "who they are". Admittedly, this does elicit some odd responses, and some are rather discouraging at first blush. One student

introduced herself as a “Pizza with Everything” and created forced metaphors about how she was “sausage: flavorful and spicy”. As absurd as that may sound, at least there was an attempt to create a metaphor. She told the class that this assignment was the very first writing assignment she actually enjoyed writing. She managed to get the words on the page, it helped her to see herself as a developing writer, and her enthusiasm helped to foster classroom conversations about different approaches to the same assignment.

More oftentimes for this first assignment, there are poignant meditations on childhood memories of spending time in the kitchen with a beloved family member who taught them about life while sharing a family recipe. One student wrote about a yearly tradition of baking Norwegian Almond Crescent cookies, a recipe that had been handed down through countless family generations. She was worried that her beloved great grandmother might not make it to the next event. The ritual involved five generations of women in her extended family, who told the same old stories while sharing the complicated method of shaping the crescent cookies by hand, which one day she hopes to share with her own children.

Remembering a lost beloved family member through food memory brings comfort, and preparing, sharing and eating food in remembrance helps us to connect with our own heritage. In *Hunger and Thirst*, writer Nancy Cary explains,

When you read about food, you access that deep sensory memory of being back in the kitchen with someone you wiled away hours with—maybe your grandma teaching you that when money and time are short, simple baking powder biscuits can save the day. Perhaps it’s your mom at your side, elbows deep into canning

peaches, juice tickling down your wrists; or maybe dad is frying sweet, smoky sausage from his family's spaghetti recipe. (15)

Each of us has a storehouse of vivid memories that transport us back to moments such as these in our lives. Sharing these memories through writing helps to create a sense of community within the classroom as students share their writing with each other. Students learn from one another; students learn about one another; students learn about one another's cultural heritage.

Students need more than regurgitating memories for a literature class; they need an academic context or framework to study the literature with a critical eye to dig out the rich cultural identity markers found in the literary texts. Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *Interpretation of Cultures* states that "Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives" (52). Geertz's theory of culture basically says that a constructed framework of values and ideals that we inherit shapes us. The process of becoming a fully realized individual involves our being integrated into this framework. We understand ourselves, and the world, through this type of cultural conditioning. Imagine being inside a picture frame looking out into the world. When we are in the frame, we cannot see what is beside us or behind us. It is only when we step out of that frame and look back that we can clearly see what is happening within our own culture. When we study other cultures, our own way of living and our own beliefs become clear. Geertz's idea is used to discuss what students learned about one another through the "You Are What You Eat" assignment, which encourages students to recognize each other's cultural differences as well as similarities.

The cultural study through literature begins with a short story that most students will be familiar with, Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," and the story allows them to apply Geertz's theory. It is only when Dee/Wangero separates from her own culture and then returns that she embraces part of her past. Students see that the only time Mama, Dee, and Maggie are *not* at odds with one another is at the dinner table because Mama prepared all of Dee's favorite foods; they can relate to what a home cooked meal with family means to someone who has been away from home for an extended time. Dee is no longer the outsider, but Hakim-a-Barber is the cultural "other" and refuses to eat Mama's well-prepared food. Hakim-a-Barber has religious beliefs that view "pork as unclean" (Walker 53), which is also an obvious example of food (religion and language) as cultural marker in this story. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said claims that,

Often you see yourself, your people, your society and tradition in their best light. Culture comes associated, often aggressively, with the nation or state, this differentiates "us" from "them." [It sets up a negative binary.] Culture in this sense is a source of identity. . . . [T]he trouble with this idea of culture is that it entails not only venerating one's own culture, but also thinking of it somehow divorced from, because transcending, the everyday world. (xiii)

Walker uses Hakim-a-Barber as "other" in an attempt to differentiate him from her own Dee. Up until this point, Dee has been seen as different from Mama and Maggie and it takes an outsider (and scarfing down homemade vittles) to help her feel close to the daughter she raised.

Through Said's theory, students become aware of the danger in marginalizing other cultures, and we move on to read Isak Dinesen's "Babette's Feast" using Geertz's theoretical

framework for a close reading and analysis. In addition to reading Dinesen's text, students view a clip or two from the film version that exemplifies the Geertz and Said theories on culture. Students see how to support their own ideas about what is happening culturally in the text and film. We discuss the director's choice in presenting the visual tale in a different way than we may have imagined in our own minds. Students spend more time with this text as they are introduced to the next two theorists to complete the cultural framework.

In an interview with Sarah van Gelder, Malidoma Somé shares ideas about how indigenous cultures who are still tied to the earth in some way can help us remember what it is like to be connected to nature, the environment, and consequently, to each other as a community (30). Dinesen's two sisters, who have never moved from their beautiful, remote Norwegian fjord in "Babette's Feast," represent a family who has been tied to the land itself, preparing food from the natural resources available to them for their own community. Other cultures throughout the story influence and eventually transform all of the characters in this story. The course takes an important turn because most students see the transformative value other cultures play in our everyday lives—especially through food and cuisine.

By using one specific text/film to exemplify a cultural interpretation, students are now prepared for the most complex concepts of the theoretical framework in Massimo Montanari's *Food is Culture*. In a simplified version of his theories, Montanari states that food is culture when it is *produced, prepared, performed and eaten*. This is the key to understanding how food reflects culture; the moment humans select food products from nature, it becomes a cultural choice based on myths, the seasons, climate, location, and availability. When humans put fire to plants and animals, we have our first kitchen, which in turn leads us to identify with our own

cuisine (Montanari xi). Therefore, the idea is that all food is culture, and since literature stands as a cultural monument, or artifact, when we study foodways in literature, we become familiar with the cultures within the text.

In order to move into complex literature, we view the end scene of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (in Julie Taymore's *Titus*) when Titus feeds Tamora her own two sons as he carefully

grind[s their] bones to dust

And with [their] blood make a paste

And of the paste a coffin [he will] rear

And make two pasties of [their] shameful heads. 5.2

Students are asked to research what a "coffin" is and what "pasties" are, which usually offers a lively discussion concerning the careful reading of a text through the cultural lens in which it is written. This food scene offers cultural examination between contemporary modern America versus Elizabethan England of Shakespeare's time, the venerated, so-called "civilized" Roman culture with the differences in the behavior of the seemingly "barbaric" Goths. Euripides's *Medea* would also work beautifully here, and this idea of cannibalism seems to pique some interest in light of the resurgence of vampire-like themes in popular culture.

One way to combat the students' urge to make everything personal is to have them split into groups and use the collection of stories by the same author, such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, to create a cultural presentation of the individual characters in the stories. Each group takes a story from the collection, and Rebecca takes one story, in order to model a presentation. She uses Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent," using the cultural

backdrop of the course, applying the theories of Geertz, Said, Somé, and Montanari, and uses resources accessed through the library, including a film clip from the Indian film *Monsoon Wedding* to show what the narrator's wife, Mala, may be experiencing after her arranged marriage. Students see how to use the tools they already have in place and learn how to use library research for their presentation. Group presentations give students real experience and confidence in front of an academic audience.

The research project, which is discussed about midpoint of the semester, is a cultural autobiography.<sup>5</sup> Students are assigned a research paper and a presentation in which they trace their family's cultural heritage back through several generations, tracing back to ancestors who left another country to come to the United States. Students are encouraged to use as many resources as possible: conduct empirical research by formally interviewing family members, review personal and family documents, examine census, court, and church records. Students are required to go to the university library to see what they can discover about their own culture and traditions using the databases. They study their family folklore, traditions and customs, especially those related to food, and ground their papers in one of the texts they have studied during the semester. Students spend class time reflecting on who they are as a member of a specific culture, how they feel about that culture, what part they fully embrace, or perhaps what they do not embrace and why. An American born, non-traditional student, whose family emigrated from Lebanon, took this research project on with great excitement as he had just found out that his wife was pregnant. His family owns a Lebanese restaurant and gourmet grocery store that has hundreds of different products from the Mideast that bring in customers from all over the

world who request specific ethnic food products. This student was able to explain his own life as an amalgam of cultures, writing:

I saw my own life in your class through the cultural views of Montanari, Somé, Geertz, and especially Said's negative binary. As someone with a Middle Eastern background, I have experienced this many times throughout my life and it was easy to recognize Said's view. . . . The influence and adaptation from culture to culture agrees with Montanari's ideas in *Food is Culture*; culture is ever changing, not eliminating one culture for another, but modifying it to adapt one's own culture, creating an entirely new one, which is represented in Middle Eastern cuisine.

This research paper and presentation exemplifies the connection between food, literature and culture. The hope is that students are able to reflect on their own heritages through experiences with food and empirical research to make direct connections that include a textual analysis and a reflection of their own heritage. The project must be grounded in a cultural text to help them understand that "all writing in the academy is academic" as David Bartholomae suggests (480). The purpose of the project is to engage students in an examination of their own culture in order to understand that culture belongs to everyone regardless of color, or ethnicity. Culture shapes us, and appreciation of our own culture is best understood in the context of other cultures, thus bringing the course full circle, back to Geertz's theory of standing within the picture frame in understanding other cultures. Recognizing foodways in literature allows us to study other cultures, but also gives us a deeper understanding and tolerance of other cultures while we see our own way of living, and our own beliefs in a new light.



## **A Few Recommendations for Teaching a Theme-based Literature Course**

When the literature survey moves away from the traditional period-based course, teachers of literature find themselves facing an exhilarating and challenging opportunity. No longer able to rely on readily available anthologies as textbooks, we are in a position to choose readings more freely. The transition to the thematic literature course also means more of our students are enrolling in the course because of a non-literary or extra-literary area of interest. Below are some practical recommendations to follow when planning such a course.

### ***Recommendations for Reading Assignments***

- If a thematic anthology is not available, build the course around shorter readings in the public domain – excerpts from longer works, short stories, and poems. A few book-length works can form the core of the course.
- Supplement literary readings with other texts. Critical and contextual articles, classic and contemporary films, interviews with authors, illustrations, works of art and music can all help students deepen their understanding of literary works and sharpen their skills of analysis.
- Allow students to choose readings for at least part of the course. Make sure the choices available vary by topic and reading level.

## ***Recommendations for Written and Other Assessments***

- Assign low-stakes short writings such as online blogs and discussion forums to encourage students to explore response to the readings. When possible and appropriate, make these public to the entire class, to facilitate small-group or class-wide online discussion.
- Build in an assignment that is not writing focused. A class presentation, video, dramatization, art project, or mock interview allows students with shaky writing skills to engage with the readings in a way that is more comfortable.
- Conclude with an individual or group research project that requires students to apply and practice key ideas from the course. Keeping in mind that students are mostly non-English majors, provide opportunities for them to make use of their own interests and strengths.

For our part, at Coastal Carolina University, we have found ways to make the theme-based literature survey fit the university's expectations for a multicultural, humanistic elective while meeting our own standards for academic rigor, and at the same time successfully introducing students to the pleasures and rewards of reading literature. This approach to the study of literature that is based on an understanding of cultural context can lead to a new, or deeper, realization of what we mean when we speak of "the humanities." The Literature and Culture course provides a space and time, all too rare these days, to learn through the powerful medium of literature about some of the cultural elements that make us human. These elements might be the foods we eat, the imaginary worlds we create, or the stories we tell our children. The possibilities truly are endless.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mike Reynolds has noted the same shift away from a focus on knowledge of a particular literary period to a concentration on readily transferable skills in his world literature class at Hamline University (113-14).

<sup>2</sup> Instructors / designers of the courses listed are (in alphabetical order) Ellen Arnold, Veronica Gerald, Anna Oldfield, Tripti Pillai, Ryan Shelley, Shannon Stewart, Daniel Cross Turner, Keaghan Turner. We are grateful to these colleagues for their ideas and inspiration.

<sup>3</sup> The Decades Project using the GERMS approach works extremely well for traditional literature classes (imagine using GERMS to explore the Elizabethan or Colonial American eras) as well as for composition classes with a focus on contemporary issues like India's involvement with human trafficking or Mexico's problem with drug cartels.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Martin and Ryan Shelley deserve credit for this idea of group-specific readings.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Jill Sessoms for sharing her ideas about this assignment.

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