1997

Enlivening Literature Through Celebrity Visits

Gregory Shafer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Shafer, Gregory (1997) "Enlivening Literature Through Celebrity Visits," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 13: Iss. 2, Article 10.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1453>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Enlivening Literature Through Celebrity Visits

Gregory Shafer

She sat in front of our class in a homespun dress, her hair in a bun and her shoes worn from years of agrarian labor. And, as she situated herself on the chair and prepared to speak, a feeling of anticipation began to permeate the room. The year is 1996, but the guest who sits pensively at the front of our American Literature class is seventeenth century writer Mary Rowlandson, a visitor from the past who is here to tell us about the Calvinist faith, the literature she has written, and her experiences with Native American Chief King Phillip.

Mary is accorded fifteen minutes before she sees her seat taken by twentieth century people like Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway, and Willa Cather. All will have their say. Each, in turn, will help to illuminate a part of the American literary experience through their animation of our textbook.

The Rationale

Each year in my American Literature classes I set aside three weeks for "Celebrity Visits." This is a time in which weeks of literary and historical research culminate in the impersonations of famous authors, characters, and personalities. More than any essay or discussion, Celebrity Visits act as a bridge between the distant world of canonical literature and the students who study it. Because students become responsible for the dress, life, literary work, and beliefs of the celebrity and

because they must recreate his or her essence in a student-driven discussion—research, drama, interpretation, and speech are wedded in a lesson that fosters more excitement about literature than any lesson I have ever taught.

The Beginnings

Celebrity Visits begin in the waning days of winter or the early weeks of spring, when students have created a firm foundation for the literature and people they are about to resurrect. After a short review of the literary movements and the authors who defined each era, the class begins the process of selecting the people they would like to research. For many, this begins a very edifying and enriching experience, as they start to consider, some for the first time, the essence of the people they are to dramatize. Several days in the library help to intensify this feeling, as each participant begins to appreciate the importance of historical context, of motivation, of values. As one student told me in his written evaluation, "I never understood Huck Finn or slavery until I decided to personify the slave Jim."

The reading, which rivals the rigor of a semester research paper, emanates quite naturally from the students' involvement in the characters they are researching. Questions of historical context, for example, force researchers to delve into

the life of a slave, a Puritan, or a Romantic poet. What, perhaps makes the work more intense, are the many disciplines the project encompasses. No research paper demands that students explore the dress, the culture, the daily life, and even the mores of an epoch as *Celebrity Visits* seem to do.

There was, for instance, the work of Adam, an eleventh grader who chose to become the fireside poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. For Adam, research began with a review of Longfellow's work and life and progressed quite naturally to include the historical background of the early nineteenth century. Longfellow's very prominent career included a teaching position at Harvard University and culminated with him becoming an icon of American letters. Early in his research, then, Adam found that an investigation into the typical life of a college professor was necessary.

Equally significant was his desire to uncover views about abolition and the growing chasm between North and South. Finally, there was the poetry and the ideas that acted as a lasting reminder of Longfellow's life. For Adam to be a convincing Longfellow, it was necessary for him to know the literature and to interpret it on a variety of levels.

Viewing a Celebrity Visit

When Adam first entered the room and sat at the chair reserved for celebrity authors, our class was struck by the physical transformation that had occurred. Dressed in a suit with an artificial moustache and beard, Adam seemed to have captured the quiet dignity of a nineteenth century literary gentleman. As he began to chronicle his life and the time in which he wrote, one could feel the presence of Longfellow. As an English teacher for eleven years, I have had few experiences that so strongly engaged the student in the literature I teach.

After telling us in convincing terms about his career, beliefs, and the period in which he lived, Adam completed his impersonation of Longfellow with a reading of his poetry, telling us as he did about the events in his life which influenced certain works. The classic, "The Tide Rises the Tide Falls," for instance, was motivated by

Longfellow's fascination with the natural world, its infinite power and affinity to God. "The Cross of Snow," which Adam also read, as intimately associated with the tragic death of his second wife and the passion she inspired.

"Literature," argues Robert Probst, "is not the private domain of an intellectual elite. It is instead the reservoir of all mankind's concerns" (7). As Adam completed his portrayal of Longfellow, as he answered the last question about his life and times and the poetry that was so integral to it, I felt he had made a "connection" with Longfellow and the poetry he had penned over a century ago. This had not been a perfunctory act of completing an assignment, but an active, student-centered social exploration into the life of a man who still had something to say to twentieth century high school students.

As Adam removed himself from the chair, Longfellow was replaced with a diminutive woman in conservative dress. As she quietly took her seat, and revealed a book of poetry, we realized that our next guest was Emily Dickinson. As with her predecessor, Dickinson began with a short, personal account of her life and the times in which she lived. As with Longfellow before her, Dickinson was a product of the nineteenth century, but unlike Longfellow, her work had been virtually untouched by much of the social and political currents of the time. "My poetry," our Dickinson began, "radiated from my very private and personal life in Amherst, Massachusetts. Although I was formally educated," she continued, "I often felt sheltered from the world around me."

With this said, Katy began with Dickinson's poem, "This is My Letter to the World," a poem about her love of nature and her anxiety about the public from which she often was secluded. From this followed other poems and discussions about her work and life. Perhaps what was most inspiring about the dramatization were the final statements made concerning women and their plight as oppressed citizens during this time. The importance of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Fuller, and the suffrage movement was highlighted in the final moments and inspired a flurry of after-school discussions.

As with Adam before her, Katy seemed to have a personal interest, an investment, in the person she had chosen to personify. The poetry, the biography, and the allusions to relevant political issues made the entire presentation a riveting look at the past. Many students continued conversations outside of class. The costumes and cosmetic changes stimulated interest from students in the halls.

And the presentations continued. Two students chose to do Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards. Several female students picked Puritans like Anne Hutchinson and Ann Bradstreet. Kyle, one student who chose to impersonate Minister Jonathan Edwards, delved into not only the metaphorical language of his life but also the dress that was worn by people during this time. For his source, he chose *Dow's Everyday Life in the Massachusetts Bay Colony*, from which he culled information about the surprisingly varied and extravagant dress of some affluent Puritan people. When Kyle entered class with a colorful outfit and hat, he dispelled many myths about culture in the Puritan eighteenth century. Later, when he went on to discuss "The Great Awakening" and the fulminating experience it involved, a genuine interest and excitement resonated throughout the entire class.

Benefits of Celebrity Visits

Celebrity Visits are productive, engaging experiences for both students and teachers. Because they empower participants to create and interpret in an active and dramatic way, they foster a very personal, reader-response approach to canonical works. The need for such student-centered projects, those which nurture autonomy and innovation, have long been a staple of progressive education. Dewey considered it the cornerstone of sound pedagogy, as he contended in *Experience and Education*:

There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in the traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active cooperation of the

pupil in construction of the purposes involved in studying. (67)

In discussing the specific role of the student in a literature class, Louise Rosenblatt has echoed this fundamental need for personal, active involvement. To read literature is to engage in a "transaction," which involves "not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader" (20). The reader who transacts with a text is an "artist" who creates and shapes the story. "The poem seen as an event in the life of the reader, as embodied in a process resulting from the confluence of reader and text," adds Rosenblatt, "should be central to a systematic theory of literature" (16).

Final evaluations from my students tended to confirm the energy and interest which seemed to permeate the class. Frequently, students felt that the Celebrity Visits afforded them the opportunity to personalize the literature and get to know the author. Their responses centered on the increased understanding which comes from a learner-centered endeavor. Many also contended that the lesson was simply "fun" because it allowed them to be creative, to do something other than read and write.

Such responses are congruent with the scholarship of Ira Shor and Paulo Freire—both of whom have argued for a curriculum that nurtures a democratic and cooperative setting, one that fosters learning by doing. Shor, in his book *Empowering Education*, adds:

A participatory pedagogy, designed from cooperative exercises, critical thought, student experience, and negotiated authority in class, can help students feel they are in sufficient command of the learning process to perform at their peak. (21)

As a teacher and participant in Celebrity Visits, I have seen students having fun as they transact with great literary works. For many, the ability to enjoy and meaningfully engage in the literature was a direct result of their freedom to make it their own, to dramatize the writer and poetry through personal interpretations. Perhaps the best indication of how successful Celebrity Visits were came with the words of one of the participants. In her final evaluation, Allyson spoke for many in class when she said: "I learned a lot

about my author and the things she wrote. Believe it or not, I'm glad we did this assignment. It's one of the few I wouldn't mind doing again."

Works Cited

Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Publishing, 1963.

Dow, George Francis. *Everyday Life in the Massachusetts Bay Colony*. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967.

Probst, Robert. *Response and Analysis: Teaching Literature in Junior and Senior High School*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook, 1988.

Rosenblatt, Louise. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*. Carbondale: Southern University Press, 1978.

Shor, Ira. *Empowering Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992.

About the Author

Gregory Shafer teaches English at Mott Community College and is a frequent conference presenter.