Tammi Simpson, Literature Position Paper

C.S. Lewis once said, “Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.” Lewis so eloquently points out the power of literature to fertilize the lives of readers – and for the purpose of this class, young readers – causing that which is inside of them to continue to be productive and grow. One could even say, based on Lewis’ quote, that without literature our lives would become stagnant and dry. As a reader of literature, I have come to embrace Lewis’s thoughts and believe that when we stop reading, we stop learning. Behind the covers of great books lie imaginative moments, eye-opening moments, moments where beauty is painted with words more vividly than any picture could capture and moments where a picture can paint a thousand words. By not reading literature we miss out on so many of these inspiring moments, and we set ourselves up to be forever ignorant of new perspectives, scientific breakthroughs, historical messages, cultural heritages –past and present – and the overall beauty and power of language. I have learned over the past few months, after an intense focus on the multilayers of literature, that there are several key ingredients working together that give literature this power to transform the soil of our souls into rich, fertile ground as Lewis suggests.

The first powerful ingredient of literature is its appeal. Before children care about the literary merit of any book, they are first captivated by the books attractive qualities – an alluring cover, bright colorful illustrations, and words that rhyme or dance across the page. Many young readers are drawn to the character(s) on the front cover, as I was to the adorable, big-eyed, wrinkly *Pokey, Little Puppy*. Others are intrigued by the story told through the illustrations and want to know more, as with Maurice Sendak’s, *Where the Wild Things Are*. Still others get lost in the rhyme and rhythm of the words in such books as those written by Dr. Suess or Shel Silverstein. While part of this appeal comes from the qualities of the books themselves, another aspect of this appeal comes from how the books are read to

them as young readers. I am convinced (even more so now as a parent) that many children's books can be made appealing to the youngest of readers if we act them out by adding voices, sound effects, and even motions. This goes to show that part of developing a child's desire to read stretches beyond the appeal of the book and that for beginning readers the responsibility lands heavily in the laps of parents, teachers and other influences in the child's life to make it a meaningful experience. Because the ingredient of appeal is such a strong one in literature, readers looking back at their childhood often find themselves reminiscing about books that had some sort of visually stimulating quality, or that were read to them in a memorable way.

Sometimes, however, a books appeal goes beyond the book itself. Occasionally, it stems from the powers of mass media as the book becomes a movie, television show, electronic game, poster, toy, comic book, or even graphic novel. Media pressure (coupled with peer pressure) gives appeal to many books that young people use as visual entertainment. Therefore, as teachers, we must be very deliberate in the way we teach students about literature so that what they view as appealing in literature begins to run deeper than first impressions or tactics of the media.

As teachers, we need to help young readers see that one of the most important and powerful ingredients of literature is its ability to be personal. In *The Joy of Children's Literature*, Denise Johnson shares a quote by Philip Pullman which states, "Every reader brings to every text his or her own preconceptions, assumptions, habits, knowledge, expectations, assiduity, openness of mind (or the reverse), temperament, and intelligence; and every reader has the perfect right to think that my text like any other, means whatever they take it to mean" (25). Pullman reminds us that why we choose literature and how we interpret literature is based on our personalities, our ideologies, our passions, and what season of life we find ourselves in at the moment of impact with the book – each of these personal characteristics plays a significant role in our interpretation of the literature as they work together to draw connections between us and the text, give us a love and an appreciation for what we

are reading and help us extract meaning from the text's message. This meaning may be interpreted differently or accepted differently from reader to reader as we neatly fit what we take from the literature into every crevice of who we are and also as we put every aspect of who we are into every crevice of the literature. During these moments of personal intermingling between the reader and the text is when personal thoughts and beliefs have the potential to be reinforced, challenged, or even completely changed.

One of the highlights of literature, and what makes literature truly personal, is when we find ourselves in it. This is also "The mirror angle" that Donald G. Smith reflected on in his own list of reasons for reading literature in his article, *Speaking My Mind: Why Literature Matters*. Smith states that "Reading is a cooperative effort of creation between the writer and the reader," and that this creation "can open up heretofore hidden or forgotten recesses. It can move us in new and powerful ways. It can reintroduce us to ourselves" (19). I found this to be true as I read, from an adult perspective, the children's books *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn and *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen. The connection between the parent and the child in both books was heartwarming and made me reflect on my own relationship with my children and the security they need from me as well as the deep bonds that I am able to build with them simply by giving them my time and attention. While undoubtedly these books have young readers as their intended audience, they are multifaceted enough to create a meaningful and personal experience between the parent and the book, between the child and the book and ultimately between the parent and the child as they read these stories together. As a teacher, I cannot underestimate the power of many other books to have this same ability to reach readers on a variety of levels.

Books are also personal when they have relatable characters or plots. One of the key reasons my classmates in TE 849 chose the books they read when they were younger was simply because the book had a character or plot to which they could relate. When the heart of the reader and the heart of a

character meet, there is little that can be done to stop an emotional connection from taking place. For many of the members of TE 849, and for many young readers today, this emotional connection is where an attraction and a love for literature begin. Based on the evidence from our class's responses to the literature they read as children, it seems safe to acknowledge that young readers are drawn to books that appeal to them personally, or in other words, that affect them on a personal level. This proves to be a very significant, positive aspect when and if the character challenges readers to overcome extraordinary obstacles and gives them courage and strength to do that which they deemed impossible – such as Roberto Innocenti's young character did in *Rose Blanche* or as young Martin did in Doreen Rappaport's book *Martin's Big Words*. However, there are also times when characters may cause us to think and do things that we would not typically do because of what we believe to be moral or right, such as the choices that Masako made in Allen Say's book, *Tea with Milk*. As readers, watching the choices made by the main characters, we must be very cautious of the power of the written word and the pressures of society hidden within the pages of the book. While the lives of characters may cause us to think critically about our own circumstances, what the character chose may not be the best choice for us as the reader. For this reason, teachers must always encourage critical thinking as a necessary part of every reading experience, even from beginning readers. I am even more convinced that this is important after being exposed to examples of literature that lacked accuracy and authenticity; this is one reason why I believe it is important to take my job as a teacher of literature very seriously. If literature affects us personally, we must be very cautious about what we label authentic, quality literature. If literature changes the way we think about the world around us, then as teachers we need to inform students about the inaccuracies of books such as *The Darkness Under the Water*, so that fallacies are not embraced as realities and misconceptions do not become stereotypical norms.

This power that authors have through written words, and the power illustrators have through pictures, to affect readers on a personal level leads me to another key ingredient found in literature; this

ingredient is voice. As readers of literature, we are constantly listening to the voices of others, and as Professor Bevin Roue stated in the *Instructor's Journal* from weeks four and five, "We have to listen to literature, ask it questions, understand its history and its messages." When we do all of these things, we are embracing the voices of the past and present, the voices of those like us and those who are different from us, and the voices of both accuracy and, unfortunately, error. All literature is somebody's voice, and inspired by Professor Roue's advice, I agree that if we want our students to be impacted in a positive way by what they hear literature saying, we as teachers must first take the time to test it, dissect it, decode it, meditate on it, and master it enough that we can effectively convey the voices of authenticity to our students.

Understanding the significance of voice in literature and being able to discern the power that it can have over the readers' ideologies and emotions is a vital awareness for young readers to be taught. I absorbed a great deal in a short period of time regarding authenticity of voice through back to back readings of Beth Kanell's, *The Darkness Under the Water* and Joseph Bruchac's, *Hidden Roots*. Kanell would have done well to heed the advice of James Ransom when he described his hesitation to write about other cultures by saying "I haven't held their babies". He understood just how delicate and careful one must handle the heart of another culture when attempting to be their voice. On the other hand, Bruchac understood the ability of literature to promote positive changes in the way we think about and live beside each other in society and to help end stereotypes that have been established through mainstream culture, and in this, he realized the need for readers, young and old, to listen to the voices that have previously been silenced. Accordingly, he was very careful about how his voice would affect his people and how others viewed Native Americans. Because of an authors' ability to freely use his/her voice (also known as freedom of speech), teachers of literature should guide their students through the gardens of literature thoughtfully and respectfully doing everything they can to help them smell the flowers while at the same time trying to avoid getting tangled in the weeds (i.e. Kanell's, *Darkness Under*

the Water). There is a great need for teachers, and anyone involved in literature for young readers, to listen to knowledgeable voices and decipher truth as much as possible. For the sake of teachers and their students, I agree with Debbie Reese in her article Contesting *Ideology in Children's Book Reviewing*, where she advocates the need for more knowledgeable voices to speak out. I appreciate Reese's passion on the subject and feel that to fully exercise "freedom" we have to allow all voices to be heard, especially those who are qualified to give sound criticism and who understand the cultures being represented (or misrepresented) in the literature.

Furthermore, I do not want to neglect the idea that there is more to literature's voice than what we hear the text saying. Listening to the voice of literature, especially children's literature, often requires more than just reading the words. In children's picture books, illustrations play an incredible part of telling the story, sometimes revealing more of the plot than the text itself. This was true in *Heckedy Peg* where the illustrations at times overpowered the text. The double page spreads with bleeds at critical moments of the plot – moments of suspense, climax and resolution – made the reader "listen" to the "voice" of the story more closely. But picture books are not the only books with a voice outside of the text. According to Joy Alexander, "The most prominent feature of the verse-novel is *voice*" (282). Much of the voice in verse-novels comes from the intimacy and the freedom of the poetic language. Readers can understand more of the author's heart by the author's use of repetition, enjambment, white space, shape, rhythm, and rhyme. One poem that really drove home the idea of voice outside of the written words was in *My Man Blue*, by Nikki Grimes. In the poem *My Own Man*, Grimes shows how Damon breaks the mold of societal stereotypes by "shrug[ging] off their teasing" and doing what he knows is right because, as Damon says, "I'm made this way." In this poem, Grimes breaks her own set of poetic molds in the way she chooses to shape and add breaks to this poem. She forms her lines as couplets, but her poem does not read as such and her rhymes are sporadic throughout rather than at the ends of each line as is expected by the reader based on the poems appearance. The

poem looks like it should read one way, but the thoughts and position of the breaks defy that stereotype just as Damon determines to defy the stereotypes that surround him. This is a fantastic example of how an author uses voice outside of that which is spoken or written to make a point or add meaning to the intended message.

Another very flavorful ingredient of literature is its ability to stimulate the reader's imagination. I am reminded of Shirley's fantastic imagination in *Come Away from the Water, Shirley* by John Burningham. While the mother and father seem to be grounded in reality, Shirley is living out an adventure full of pirates and sword fights and buried treasure. Students can see how imagination has the power to make the mundane turn interesting and transform ordinary moments into extraordinary adventures. If I had to guess, I would say that Shirley is an avid reader. How else would she know about adventure, pirate ships and buried treasure? Getting students to see how literature can change the mundane into something extraordinary is one of the first steps to getting them interested in reading. But not all imaginative moments are about pirate ships and adventure. Reese argues that "multiethnic literature can also help children stretch their cultural and historical imaginations and give them encouragement to view the world critically, from the perspectives of people long ignored" (5); in this respect, imagination is vital to the reader's experience on varying levels.

Of course, engaging students in literature is about more than just their ability to read it; literature is a reader's door into the meaningful conversations of humanity that have been continuing for centuries. Taking part in these conversations by becoming readers of literature builds community in our classrooms and in our world; it also answers many of life's questions about the world in which we live. However, the more we know about how to interact in this conversation, the more meaningful it will be to us and most importantly, our students. Since most students do not come to our classes with a profound appreciation of literature, I cannot overlook how important it is to teach students how to look at literature so that this appreciation can be developed. That was a prerequisite for every module of this

course and is a vital part to teaching students as readers how to appreciate the depth and qualities of literature that we place before them and help them look past what is cute and help them find what is complex.

Thankfully, there are several choices for how readers choose to engage in their own literary experience. From what I have learned in TE 849, literature has variety and can take many forms. It can be a story told through prose, pictures or poetry; it can even be a graphic novel or a movie. I have also learned that literature is not just a tool for teaching some predetermined concept, but that literature is itself a complex entity that if presented properly can help readers of all ages think critically and deeply about the world in which they live. There is much to discover in literature if, as readers, we truly take the time to observe it – to look deeper than our first impressions by discovering the details in the illustrations, uncovering the complexities of the literary elements, and listening for authenticity and accuracy in the voices of both the author and illustrator. Young people depend on us as teachers of literature to know the literature in which we teach; they trust us as their guides in reading literature and they trust us that what we show them will benefit them. Ultimately, they trust that we, as teachers, will think outside of our own boxes and present them with literature that may even be outside of our own comfort zones. We cannot assume that we know what our students will like or dislike when it comes to literature and we have to be prepared to branch out on occasion with the hope of capturing, captivating and challenging the hearts of every student as an individual, personal reader.

Looking again at the quote by C.S. Lewis, we can conclude that reading literature is not just a means for us to escape our realities, but a way in which we can understand our realities more profoundly. Literature holds the keys to our own broadened understanding about the world around us and about what lies within us. With this in mind, I believe that literature should be for more than our enjoyment; it should also be for our enlightenment. Literature should be cogitated, and “great” literature cannot help but be. Literature should make us think, both deeply and intently, for it is through

literature that history is captured, science is debated, and stories are shared. Because of this, I believe literature is a vital voice that students must hear to help them understand the experiences of others in a way that pushes them to think critically about who they are by discovering themselves, and about the world in which they live by making connections with those around them. Therefore, my goal in teaching literature is to present it in such a way that students will grow in appreciation for its array of perspectives as well as its beauty.