

Enjoyment of political satire in particular demands a great deal of cultural knowledge, and social and political humor extending from self-deprecatory remarks to biting satire is a striking characteristic of American and British writing. Few literary traditions have had so many authors so merciless about the political foibles of their own society (and other societies). George Orwell's *Animal Farm* thus became the major novel for study in my curriculum. Moreover, it is not difficult to read, it has only ten chapters, and its political allusions are easy to understand because my grade 8 students spend a great deal of time in social studies classes learning about types of governments. It is also rich with symbolism and allusions to other ideas and character types, so it can be linked to many other pieces of literature over the course of the year.

Beast fables/epics, fairy tales, fables, allegories, and parables were then included so that students could understand genres that were intended for didactic purposes, reflect on Orwell's choice of genre for his political satire, and learn how to connect what educators call "big ideas" across texts. For example, the perversion of the notion of equality in *Animal Farm* could help students understand its perversion in Kurt Vonnegut's short story "Harrison Bergeron."

Students also had no basic knowledge of Arthurian legends or quest literature, so they did not understand chivalry, what a hero is, words like "quixotic," or such phrases as "tilting at windmills." It became my quest to teach students where the meanings of common ideas, words, and allusions in our culture come from.

Finally, students had not learned to do close reading. Even though most had read "The Tell-Tale Heart" in grade 7, they didn't know the significance of the title or that the old man had simply had a heart attack.

Carol Jago, past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, once said at a seminar that the "teaching of language is the teaching of what it means to be human." What it means to be human in our culture became the long-term goal of my curriculum.

To repeat, my classroom literature curriculum was developed as a response to perceived gaps in my grade 8 students' background knowledge and as bridges to texts they may encounter in later years. Compatibility with Common Core's "standards" was unintentional, as most of the texts in my curriculum were chosen prior to Arkansas's adoption of those standards in 2010. And because Common Core only *suggests* titles as ex-

amples of complexity and its "standards" are as skills-based as Arkansas's own standards were, my curriculum is as valid as any others that may be perceived to align with Common Core's standards.

### MY GRADE 8 LITERATURE CURRICULUM

The only way to teach kids to read texts for meaning is to give them lots and lots of meaningful texts to read. Henry David Thoreau said: "Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the chosen texts include but are not limited to:

- Short stories by Edgar Allan Poe, James Thurber, Kurt Vonnegut, O. Henry, and Neil Gaiman
- Fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, Roald Dahl, and Hans Christian Andersen
- Beast epics, beast fables, and pourquoi stories by Rudyard Kipling, Joel Chandler Harris, and Aesop
- Allegories or parables: *Everyman*, Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave"
- Poems by Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Herrick, Lewis Carroll, William Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold, Leigh Hunt, May Riley Smith, Lord Byron, and Rudyard Kipling
- Films and excerpts that complement literature study: *Bang, Bang, You're Dead*; *The Princess Bride*; *Excalibur*; *Man of La Mancha*; *Harold and Maude*; *Shakespeare in Love*; *Can't Buy Me Love*
- *Animal Farm*, portions of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
- Speeches: "I Have a Dream," John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address, and Polonius's speech from *Hamlet*

Several children's poems are included as "access" pieces and for teaching figurative language. I drew from Shel Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, Judith Viorst's *If I Were in Charge of the World* and *Other Worries*; *Poems for Children and their Parents*, and Dr. Seuss's books for concepts such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, simile, metaphor, and onomatopoeia. I incorporated popular music (e.g., by