

Don't Quit on Brit Lit

By Megan Pankiewicz

DELIGHTED TO MEET YOU

First, let's be clear. I'm no literary snob. I don't read *Ulysses* for fun or complete the Sunday *Times* crossword at breakfast. I don't have portraits of Dickens or Bronte or Austen on my walls. To be completely honest (and I may be going too far here), I'm not really a fan of Dickens.

So my conviction for teaching pre-21st century British literature to students is not borne of some zealous passion to reinstate the glory days of English classes past, when children dutifully recited beloved passage of Yeats, Keats, or Byron.

This article grew out of a presentation I gave with my good friend and former colleague, Charlotte Roberts. We wanted to share our ideas and practices with other teachers, and this article is an extension of that desire and our belief in the significance of teaching this material to secondary students today.

WHY BRIT LIT GIVES US THE COLLYWOBBLES

Picture a student from one of your classes. It's Tuesday. She's just eaten a lunch, set up a date with her boyfriend, and texted her mom that soccer practice is cancelled. You hand her a book when she walks into class. She rolls his eyes, flops down in her chair and flips to the first page while the other kids file into the room. Here's what she reads:

Mr. Utterson the lawyer was a man of a rugged countenance, that was never lighted by a smile; cold, scanty and embarrassed in discourse; backward in sentiment; lean, long, dusty, dreary, and yet somehow loveable.

Her thought at that moment? "Yeah, right!"

There are many hurdles to teaching and reading British literature, particularly the texts written in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, which are the most commonly taught. Here are the primary obstacles:

- Differences due to culture and time period
- Length and density of texts
- Style of writing (including sentence structure, language, and vocabulary)
- Quantity of characters (and their many names)
- Wit and subtlety of meaning
- Multiple meanings of text

It's a daunting list of challenges, to be sure, but all of them can be overcome.

WE SHALL NEVER SURRENDER

So why bother putting up a fight? Because we can't allow our students to ignore great works of literature because they're difficult. Brit lit challenges the reading abilities of all students. It exposes them to a style of writing more formal and dense than they encounter in today's texts. To improve one's ability to read Brit lit is to improve one's ability to read other complex texts (mortgage papers, job contracts). When students struggle with these texts and succeed, they earn their knowledge and pride – an applicable lesson for all paths in life.

Much has been made of excerpts and the use of shorter texts over the last decade, to the point where quantity has overwhelmed quality. Teaching Brit Lit takes time. You may only be able to incorporate one or two longer works into your curriculum and that is fine – great, even. These texts require us to move slowly and carefully, providing students with a great deal of support.

With these texts, we expand our students' world views so they imagine the lives of people from other times and places, while illuminating the common threads of humanity that bind us together. The classic pieces of Brit Lit do not wrap life in a pretty box and bow. These characters slog through life's gray waters, trying to figure out the black and white as best they can, just like real people do. These texts ask the one big question: What does it mean to be human?

To successfully teach these works, the teacher must shoulder a heavy burden of responsibility, but we cannot flag or fail.

AN EXCUSE TO SEE MR. DARCY? BRILLIANT!

To help students see and hear the characters in these texts, we must provide them with the images and sounds of pre-21st century England. For visuals, the teacher or students can create a PowerPoint presentation comprised of photographs and paintings. If you've had the good fortune to visit England, here's the perfect excuse to dust off those photo albums. Movie clips can be used for two-fold reasons: one, to provide exposure to the sounds and sights of England; two, to show a social situation in which the British rules of decorum differ from our own. Explicitly teaching these rules of British decorum is crucial to understanding these works. While we, as adults, may take for granted our understanding of the importance of reputation in Victorian England, we must remember that our students need help understanding why Elizabeth cared so much about Lydia's behavior as it affected her own chances of marriage.

Small excerpts and poems can efficiently build background knowledge throughout the year, leading up to the study of the major text. I suggest finding audio recordings of these works read by British speakers, so students begin to develop an ear for the rhythm of the language and pronunciation of the words. One excellent resource I discovered for both audio and texts can be found at <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go>.

PACE YOURSELF OR YOU'LL GET KNACKERED

In this race, we must all be turtles. These works aren't just long, they are dense. Like hasty pudding dense. In order for kids to stick with it, they can't feel like we are dragging them behind a runaway buggy. Here's a way for them to feel ahead: assign them Sparknotes. Yep. When reading E.M. Forester's *Passage to India* for the first time, my friend Charlotte had a revelation: she had to focus all her mental energy on just keeping the characters and plot straight. But how often do we ask students to notice language, symbolism, theme, imagery, and character development as they read a book for the first time? With these especially challenging texts, we can allow students to grasp the basics (plot, characters) before they read the first sentence, thereby freeing up mental real estate for other purposes.

We keep the pace slow and steady by assigning 10 to 20 pages per night. We read the book too, perhaps staying only a few chapters ahead, so the demands of the text are fresh for us as well. By doing so, we anticipate the trickier sections and read those with students in class together. We also provide students with a calendar of the reading

assignments, so they can engage in time management. A final consideration: thoughtfully choose the time of year for teaching the text based on your knowledge of your students. For years, I taught *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and our Brit Lit reading circles in the 3rd nine weeks. Then, one year I changed my schedule to align with a fellow teacher and realized I'd been a daft cow. During the 3rd nine weeks my kids were more prone to burn-out; it was a long haul from the winter holidays to spring break. But in the 2nd nine weeks they were still energized from the summer, and that energy made a big difference in their ability to grapple with these works. Your school calendar and students may be different, so consider when they will be at their best.

BARMY SENTENCES

Though Brit Lit is written in English, many students feel they are muddling through a foreign language. Most overwhelming are the sentences that seem to go on and on and on, wandering down a trail of meaning students often lose sight of halfway through. Here again we must scaffold and support. Starting at the beginning of the year, introduce students to excerpts with which you can practice chunking. Students will need a refresher lesson on the function of the semi-colon, including a modeling of how they can use the semi-colon to break the sentence into sections for paraphrasing. Students should also be explicitly taught to read confusing sentences aloud, annotating along the way, taking their time to hear the words.

Students can learn to read these complex sentences more fluently by composing their own. The Imitation Assignment requires students to mimic the sentence structure of a passage of the teacher's choice; often, I would select three options and let students choose. They are given free rein in terms of content and language, but they must follow the original syntax as closely as possible. This assignment allows for creativity within boundaries, expands their writing skills, and strengthens their reading ability. The finished products make great showcase pieces around the room, too. (see Fig. 1)

BITS 'N BOBS AND WEIRD WORDS

My colleague, Charlotte, has taught Advanced Placement Literature and 9th grade gifted for close to 30 years. The woman knows Brit Lit. But she will be the first to tell you, she had to teach herself and she's still taking classes over her summer vacation. (Let it be known these classes are held at Oxford and Edinburgh, so I don't feel too bad for her.)

So how does she ground her teaching? By keeping the assignments almost entirely in class. Her seniors read most of their texts outside of class, but she reads quite a bit with her freshmen in class together. All her students are required to annotate, whether in class or as homework. She believes, as I do, that students need to physically interact with the text in order to gain ownership over its study. A great technique of hers: when the class discusses a text they've already read and annotated, she has students use a different writing utensil to add comments from the class discussion to earn more points on their work. Not only does it expand their annotating skills, this technique encourages students to pay attention during class discussions and physically take note of how much more meaning can be unearthed by sharing thoughts.

Annotation and discussion is where the teacher can lead students to focus on specific words, images, and symbols, and then pull them back to identify patterns. The key to mastering a large text is by breaking it into small units to discuss and explain and

analyze. This microscopic-macroscopic approach helps students understand become more comfortable with the language in these texts. (See Fig. 2)

Throughout the year, I model close reading with my students. I select important passages from our texts, put them up on the document camera, explain why I think the passage is important, then annotate and discuss the passage with them. Once I know students understand the process, I turn what I do into a small-group assignment that requires the students to teach. They pick a passage, annotate it and discuss what they will teach, I make all the photocopies, and then they teach the passage while the other students learn. I hold the teachers and the learners accountable for their work, and the students take the assignment seriously as a result.

As for the obstacle of vocabulary, I don't have a magic bean. But I do have a few suggestions. One, by staying a day or two ahead of the students' reading assignments, you can predict and point out the key words you know students will need to understand to comprehend the reading. Before even beginning the text, you can also waylay students' insecurities about spelling (yes, "centre" is center and "colour" is color), or other quirks of the time period like leaving off the last two digits of the year ("the year of grace 17--"). A few books have annotated versions (I'm particularly fond of *The Annotated Pride and Prejudice*), which are good recommendations.

BOB'S YOUR UNCLE!

One thing British writers are not afraid to use: characters. Their books are teeming with people, and kids can get a little overwhelmed. Once again, the teacher must anticipate this problem before kids crack the cover. Students should keep track of the characters by creating a running list in a notebook, on a bookmark, or on sticky notes inside the cover. Another classic technique: ask students to bring in magazines, specifically ones that feature people. Small groups work on finding images that represent the characters, glue those images on a large posterboard, list the key personality traits, and include a speech bubble with a significant quotation from that character. The posters can then be hung around the room for reference.

British writers tend to refer to their characters by several names (testing out "that which is a rose" theory, perhaps?), which can confuse our young modern readers. Take this excerpt from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*:

Mr. Enfield and the lawyer were on the other side of the by-street; but when they came abreast of the entry, the former lifted up his cane and pointed.

"Did you ever remark that door?" he asked; and when his companion had replied in the affirmative, "It is connected in my mind," added he, "with a very odd story."

Let's list the different references to the same two people: Mr. Enfield, the lawyer, they, the former, he, his companion. Pretty confusing stuff – but at least we can put kids at the ready and show them how to connect the dots by modeling how we would handle these instances. Tangentially, students will also require a mini-lesson on the rules of titles (i.e. calling the oldest daughter Miss Bennet).

One of my favorite character-related assignments asks students to imitate "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Blackbird" by substituting the subject of the original poem (the blackbird) with a character of their choice (Heathcliff). The task requires students to think symbolically, abstractly, and to use detail and imagery wisely. The first time I give the assignment (because I use it throughout the year) the students and I read the

poem and discuss it. I then show them an imitation I've written as a model. Students use the rest of the class period to work on their poems, then take them home to finish. The next day, students can share their favorite stanzas, which have always blown me away.

CHEEKY DEVILS

British writers and American teenagers share a common love: sarcasm. The critical difference is that American teenagers like theirs to punch you in the gut; whereas British writers use theirs to cut you off at the knees. Entertaining kids with sarcasm is easy; getting them to recognize it within Brit lit is hard. Again, we must pre-read, predict their lack of understanding, discuss and analyze critical passages of the text. Before students read the proposal Mr. Collins makes to Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, ask students to write their ideal marriage proposal. No need to explain why. See if there are any brave volunteers who want to share theirs with the class. Discuss common features. Then, hit them with Mr. Collins. The irony will be obvious and should lead to a humorous follow-up discussion and an excellent teachable moment on identifying tone.

HAVE A BUTCHER'S AT THE MEANING

The last obstacle to address leads us back to our initial question: Why bother teaching Brit Lit? If for no other reason, we can say, "Because it makes us think." Not only is it ok for students to struggle with the actual reading, I want students to wrestle with the meaning of these works. When I ask, "What does this writer say about what it means to be human?" I don't want kids to pick an option from a four-point list I've created. I want them to figure it out, to talk about it, to argue their position. We know that when students take the lead, they take ownership over the material. These texts provide rich opportunities for student-led discussions and Socratic circles – all supported by textual evidence. Take those gray areas and make kids muddle around in them. One idea: break students into small groups and assign them opposing claims you've created or discovered in your research. Group 1 must argue that Mr. and Mrs. Bennett are good parents who provide for their daughters' futures. Group 2 must argue that Mr. and Mrs. Bennett's parenting skills jeopardized their daughters' futures. No matter the following platform for debate, students should end by discussing the strongest points.

HELPING THE NEXT GROUP OF GORMLESS KIDS

After completing our study of the text, I would ask my students to write a letter of advice to a future reader. I jazzed up the request by letting them use colored paper and pens, but I provided very specific topics I wanted them to address. These included the following:

- Thoughts and feelings upon beginning the novel
- Experiences reading the novel
- Difficulties experienced and suggestions for overcoming obstacles
- Aspects most enjoyed
- Aspects of importance
- Acknowledgement of the author's talent in _____
- Final thoughts upon concluding the novel

These letters were a means of cathartic self-reflection for my students, and they truly helped my students in the next school year.

SPREAD THE CHEERIO!

I've already expounded on why I believe teaching Brit Lit remains important, so I'll conclude with another suggestion. Have fun with the Brits! Teach funny British phrases and use them in class. Make a Socratic circle more festive by providing tea and scones (or better yet, ask parents to help with provisions). Bring in special guests – someone British, people who've been to England, an exchange student – to speak for five minutes or an hour, depending on their topic. Teach students a formal partner dance. Grab some sheets, a CD player with an audio recording of the text, and take your students (and their books) outside for a fresh air reading. These works can be heavy, but we can levity to their study.

I hope this article has provided you with usable, practical ideas to bring into your classrooms. Teaching these texts is difficult, trying, and downright frustrating at times, but we can't quit on Brit Lit. It's too legit.

FIG. 1 – Example of Imitation Assignment

Original text from *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*:

Mr. Utterson the lawyer was a man of a rugged countenance, that was never lighted by a smile; cold, scanty and embarrassed in discourse; backward in sentiment; lean, long, dusty, dreary, and yet somehow lovable. At friendly meetings, and when the wine was to his taste, something eminently human beaconed from his eye; something indeed which never found its way into his talk, but which spoke not only in these silent symbols of the after-dinner face, but more often and loudly in the acts of his life. He was austere with himself; drank gin when he was alone, to mortify a taste for vintages; and though he enjoyed the theatre, had not crossed the doors of one for twenty years. But he had an approved tolerance for others; sometimes wondering, almost with envy, at the high pressure of spirits involved in their misdeeds; and in any extremity inclined to help rather than to reprove.

Student's Imitation:

Leila the pastor's wife, was a women of a pleasing countenance, that was warm and held a pitcher of hope; bright, funny, and a tad aloof around company; open to all; smart, kind, imaginative, and yet realistic. Around the conjugation an even higher bright shown from her face; something you can always count on in her radiance, a women of God. She was a vigilante for her loved ones; and enjoyed spreading her joy in the Lord. But even when people are against her she welcomed them with open arms, sometimes holding on to her hope for them, almost with force, with the warmth of her smile; she never let go of light. She prays to God, rather than fight.

FIG. 2 - Annotations by teacher Charlotte Roberts

Access + Power of Kurtz
Pg. 63 of being this way
wonderful way

Contradiction -
Kurtz knows no restraint
yet struggles with himself
anguish of his soul Pg. 63
He judged man a tiny speck
spoken in a moment
Pg. 68 - dark shadow
yet gorgeous eloquence

[P. 68 Important triumph of Kurtz]

Page 61 and page 64

alone - only in wilderness not in company

Marlow's realization of Kurtz being alone and he doesn't understand himself

Marlow's struggle

Drums beating
Chains
decided his soul

Partly how he feel on heaven or earth

Kurtz's sane

Contradiction of Kurtz
mad soul - He was alone (wilderness)

Can't get into his darkness

world = work

Kurtz knows

That is his knowledge
Marlow - he's fascinated not moved - again no emotion

No he won't - He will fall to the devil but he did judge himself

I shall swing your heart yet - through darkness

P. 63
P. 65 - reality of the idea that we can step over
Kurtz - had judged / summed up
"horror" - not just of the atrocities / but reality of his bodily weight of darkness & he can't win

P. 68

I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. And, don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head—though I had a very lively sense of that danger, too—but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him—himself—his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air. I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what's the good? They were common everyday words—the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares. Soul! If anybody ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I wasn't arguing with a lunatic either. Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear—concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear; and therein was my only chance—barring, of course, the killing him there and then, which wasn't so good, on account of unavoidable noise. (But his soul was mad.) Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity. He struggled with himself, too. I saw it—I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself. I kept my head pretty well; but when I had him at last stretched on the couch, I wiped my forehead, while my legs shook under me as though I had carried half a ton on my back down that hill. And yet I had only supported him, his bony arm clasped round my neck—and he was not much heavier than a child.

"His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines. But I had not much time to give him, because I was helping the engine-driver to take to pieces the leaky cylinders, to straighten a bent connecting-rod, and in other such matters. I lived in an infernal mess of rust, filings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet-drills—things I abominate, because I don't get on with them. I tended the little forge we fortunately had aboard; I toiled wearily in a wretched scrap-heap—unless I had the shakes too bad to stand.

"One evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him say a little tremulously, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.' The light was within a foot of his eyes. I forced myself to murmur, 'Oh, nonsense!' and stood over him as if transfixed.

"Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: "The horror! The horror!"

"I blew the candle out and left the cabin.

FIG. 3 – Excerpt from “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Pip”

I

Among twenty idle cows,
The only moving things
Were the feet of a young boy.

II

I was of three minds,
Like a fork
With three metallic prongs.

III

The boy whirled in the winter winds.
He was a small part of her puppet show.