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by Robert Williams

## **The House of Comprehension: Teaching Students the Elements of Literature**

Constance Casserly's *The House of Comprehension: Teaching Students the Elements of Literature* will definitely appeal to virtually any teacher planning lessons on literary analysis. So too, with a primary audience of middle-school teachers in mind, the author includes both basic and more advanced activity ideas, ideas perhaps especially helpful for newer teachers who have less experience with the whole enterprise of planning and executing lessons across an entire year. More to the point, the work is organized as a curricular sequence in five chapters, or "program," as the author puts it, but plays also on the familiar tropes of children's stories (*This Is The House That Jack Built*, *The Three Little Pigs*, etc.) in execution and in the illustrations as done by Jacob Grant. In short, the text offers a complete program of materials, organized in a linear format that begins with foundational principles (pardon the unavoidable double entendre) for teachers—general boilerplate related to standards and outcomes we expect to see in any such handbook—and continues into specific activities and guidelines and templates for student activities and teachers' own

notes alike. Indeed, one strength of the text is its relentless appeal to reflective teaching, with reproducible Teacher's Notes templates throughout. Overall, the book has much to offer, and many activity worksheets, but also with materials that will be largely familiar to experienced teachers, or even perhaps well prepared new teachers. That is not to say veterans will find nothing useful here, for Casserly does an excellent job of collecting and creating and organizing activities coherently, and with some surprises in the way of high interest activities, many of which will serve perfectly as scaffolding upon which student comprehension can be built, just as the author intends.

In any event, at its core, *The House of Comprehension* is a text that readily fulfills its intended design as a supplement, or indeed a complete replacement for any other planning materials a literature teacher might use. Further, to the author's credit, the book will clearly work to provide a full sequence of lessons spanning a significant period of instructional time, and for any work of literature...repeat as needed.

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With sections playfully keyed to the metaphorical construction process as might befit the efforts of *Three Little Pigs Contracting-Blueprints, Foundation, Framing, etc.*—and likewise aligned with Common Core curricular standards, the book offers all manner of reading, writing, and discussion opportunities. The author likewise strikes a good balance between offering enough structure to enable a beginner, but not too much structure such that veterans will be put off. For example, the reproducible, Unit Planning form (pg. 20) offers predictable categories of objectives, audience, and content, along with others, and provides examples for an 8th-grade engagement, but of course recognizes that some sections won't be completed in all planning work, and all sections are completely open to some interpretation.

So too, as a plan book for working through any given piece of literature, Casserly's design allows for more or less depth of investigation. Working through each section, individual teachers may wish to completely skip some activities, or whole groups of activities, or may repeat certain activities for emphasis, or for various interpretations of literary qualities as with the character motivation worksheet on page 79, which can be repeated for several characters in a more complicated work. This option holds true as well for reproducible worksheets on most of the topics suggested throughout the work.

All of the ideas for engaging readers with symbols and symbolic imagery (pgs 120-25) readily fall into this category, as do the worksheets collected in Chapter Five, many of which presuppose that learners are competent with the preceding concepts addressed in earlier chapters. Indeed, for older students, much of Chapters 1 through 3 is familiar ground involving prompts and worksheets designed to help readers recognize important details of characterization, setting, plot, and any other concrete information explicitly found in the text. Later, in Chapters 4 and 5, Casserly devotes more attention to less obvious, or more abstract concepts such as the aforementioned symbolism, and perhaps most importantly, theme (in Chapter 4), followed by the expectations in Chapter 5 that readers will need less explicit prompting, and less structure, in their analytical work.

With those attributes to recommend it, the book is not without some few flaws, chiefly among them, the author's conception of theme, and of the viability of investigations into authorial purpose. Beginning with that latter topic, authorial purpose, Casserly makes no mention of Wimsatt and Beardsley's nominally famous (or infamous) Intentional Fallacy, an argument stating: "[T]he design or intention [purpose] of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art..." (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946)." In fact, several pages

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of materials in Chapter 4 provide templates and activities expressly designed to encourage the exploration of authorial intent, a troublesome proposition at best. Yet in Casserly's defense, to fully engage in the work of English language arts, one must tread a fine line between literary analysis that avoids wading in the swamp of hypothetical authorial purpose, and writer's workshop teaching that must not only wade, but set up virtual housekeeping in that same swamp in guiding less experienced writers to be supremely intentional authors. Indeed, on the one side of that line, to encourage readers—especially less experienced readers—to speculate on authorial intent is to invite all manner of mis-readings and mis-appropriations of content to some highly suspect interpretation of an author's state of mind, an always unknowable quantity. Even authors who claim to explain their purpose, who claim to be writing for this or that reason, are not to be trusted, firstly because of their own subjectivity, and secondly because of their own inherent capacity for fictionalizing, celebrated by readers through a glad and willing suspension of disbelief. However, on the other side of that same line, to lead a writing workshop, one must endlessly remind most participants that the writing they produce must prompt the coherent construction of meaning in a reader. In that vein, clearly, the more intentional the writer is about manipulating the reader's response, the reader's construction of meaning—including

through the use of nuances of tone and mood and connotation—the more successful as a writer one will surely be.

Of course, aside from those polarities, as a third complication, we do find an efferent reading comprehension objective that must perhaps be characterized as between both the stance of aesthetic literary critic or analyst with no concern for authorial intent, and the stance of the writer with every concern for authorial purpose. In the middle, as it were, we find efferent critical reading, a step along the road to the critical literacy of Paulo Freire with its attendant political or social engagement and activism. For that dimension, critical reading in a social realm, English language arts teachers must move away from authorial intent as an aesthetic, literary concept, but embrace authorial intent as a decidedly efferent and political or persuasive stance, one that recognizes that, say, an advertisement has a purpose of persuasion just as a political speech does, and savvy readers and listeners and viewers all consider the interests being served by the enactment of any persuasive communication. Ultimately, however, as with authorial intent from the writer's perspective, the author's purpose has no place in Casserly's design regarding, in her own words, how to teach students *The Elements of Literature*, a decidedly aesthetic proposition that pushes aside both writing and critical reading in favor of literary analysis. And if we fail, as teachers, to carefully distinguish

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between the concepts of 1), aesthetic or literary reading in the Arts, 2) critical reading in the social or efferent realm, and 3) intentional manipulation of language as a writer in composition studies, we cannot in good faith expect our students to do so, either.

Finally, as an extension of Casserly's relatively cavalier—or superficially realized—treatment of authorial purpose, she offers equally suspect and abbreviated activities for the analysis of theme in the literary arts. As a matter of fact, *The House of Comprehension* again confuses the idea of an author's, imaginary, intended message (technically a variation on purpose) with the abstraction that is theme, and that develops as an extension of the concrete details of setting, plot, characterization, tone, and mood. With worksheets such as the one found on page 114, What's in a Theme, and that explicitly calls theme “the author's purpose for writing,” and with a definition—“the statement the author is making”—on page 113, Casserly's so called module on theme is sure to sow confusion as students are potentially led to equate theme with some lesson-style statement, or profound statement of “universal message” (Casserly's phrase). She even goes so far as to offer one such lesson statement as an example, also on page 113: “[I]n war, everyone loses.” Likewise, as a consideration of the page numbers quoted above partially reveals, and as a further weakness in the text's treatment of

theme, typically the most difficult concept in literary analysis because of its abstract nature, Casserly devotes only seven pages to exploring the concept, or to helping readers articulate a thematic statement based in solid textual analysis, and half of those are largely blank templates. Indeed, Casserly's whole exposition on theme (pg. 113) proceeds in reverse, suggesting that an author works from theme backwards (authorial purpose again) as “the glue that holds all the elements of literature together,” but ignoring the reality that the concrete details of the work—plot, etc.—are the pieces from which theme arises as a coherent, aesthetic response in the transaction that is inherent in the reading act (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Yet, as we noted in the beginning, there is much to like in this author's approach to guiding learners toward a more mature appreciation—and comprehension—of literature. In the end, then, Constance Casserly's *The House of Comprehension: Teaching Students the Elements of Literature* should probably be on most language arts teachers' bookshelves, right alongside other, similar workbook-style texts, and for its clear, linear style and emphatic appeal to reflective instruction if nothing else. The text is filled with highly useful activities, and insights into how teachers can motivate and engage with learners as readers, while satisfying even the most bureaucratically minded administration's call for documenta-

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tion and planning. The text certainly has far more to recommend it than to condemn it.

### References

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*At Radford University since 1999, Professor Robert Williams seeks ways to motivate and engage students as autonomous learners, dependent upon no authoritarian structures of punishment and reward, and self-aware enough to know it. He also enjoys travel, most automotive and shooting sports, and roller-skating.*

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