Art as Meaning-Making in a Secondary School English Classroom: A “Secret Compartment” Book Project on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

From my experiences teaching English classes of all grades and levels, I learned that often, formal analytical essays only capture a fraction of students’ understanding and insights about a text, whether it is due to lack of skill or motivation to write on the students’ part, or the mundaneness and constraints of an essay assignment. Even among students in my AP classes who have a sincere interest in engaging with literature and are keen to respond to and analyze texts, not all of them find it easy to communicate their ideas in writing or enjoy writing. Furthermore, I learned that while students are well-trained at discovering meaning in literature, many of them often struggle at making meaning. Such observations led me to explore art as a way for students to interact with literature and represent their understanding.

Integrating visual arts in English classrooms is a valuable and essential undertaking (Albers; Eisner, *Cognition,* “What”). Along with other arts, visual arts “are fundamental in refining sensibility and cultivating the capacity to think imaginatively” (Eisner, “What” 16). They support students in “discover[ing] new meanings, unsuspected angles of vision” (Greene, *Landscapes* 16; Greene, *Releasing*). Specifically, engaging students in art-making enriches the study of literature because the generative process incites deeper reflections of literary texts. That is, image-making can be considered a way of knowing, a fully participatory method for students to make sense of the world. Furthermore, in compelling students to express their ideas metaphorically, art invites the formation of complex ideas and the internalization and personalization of learning. Finally, visuals may capture student responses that are otherwise inexpressible in writing or discussion (Albers; Eisenkraft; Eisner, *The Arts*; Hubbard; Purves, Rogers, and Soter). Student discussions and reflections about the process and product of art-making also contribute significantly to the development of literacy and meaning-making. Students can deepen their inquiry about a text by responding to each other’s artwork, analyzing how artistic elements parallel literary elements, and critically examining what worked or did not in their visual representations (Albers; Eisenkraft; Hubbard). In all, art-making in an English classroom engages students and supports examination of text through situating students as meaning-makers. Peggy Albers writes:

> An artist’s process of meaning making, like the authoring cycle, is a powerful framework which allows students to construct and generate meanings for themselves and for others. Literacy in art is a process in which students outgrow themselves, solve meaning-making problems, and enable themselves to take risks with expression and techniques. (344)

The “Secret Compartment Book” Project

In the urban high school I was teaching at, my grade 11 AP Literature classes were studying Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* through literature circles. I had noticed that students undertook the role of
Illustrator with immense effort, purpose, and creativity. Moreover, the group discussions surrounding the Illustrator’s visual were dynamic; students readily connected the artwork with the novel and offered thoughtful interpretations. This led me to design and implement an art-based culminating project.

Morrison’s *Beloved* tells the tale of Sethe, an escaped slave who, nearly two decades later, still is fettered by fragmented memories of the unspeakable events at Sweet Home plantation. Sethe and her new home are haunted by the ghost of her nameless baby, who lies under a tombstone marked with a single word, “Beloved.” Surrounded by Paul D. and her daughter Denver, who bear scars from their own past, Sethe struggles to learn to live freely and in the present. Given that *Beloved* is a poetically written text in which images and events take on multiple “hidden” meanings, the format of the “secret compartment” booklet was particularly appropriate and challenging. Through a series of folds and a cut, a large sheet of paper can be made into a six-page booklet, which resembles a basic book, except that the middle of the book opens to reveal additional pages forming a hidden interior compartment.¹ My objective was to have students use predominantly visuals to explicate a significant aspect—character, setting, symbol, image, or theme—of *Beloved*. Most importantly, students must use the inside compartment thoughtfully to reveal a deeper aspect of their topic or to communicate an insight, perhaps through presenting an image or message in the hidden compartment that juxtaposes the ideas on the main pages.

I introduced the project by teaching students to fold the booklet. To facilitate working with the booklet later, I had them mark the front and back pages, as well as page 3, where a cutout offering a view into the hidden compartment would later be made. Then, I talked through the example of exploring Paul D.’s character and his relationship to the past. Turning the pages of the model booklet, I suggested that each page could depict an aspect of this character’s present life and his hopes for the future. Just when the students thought the task was straightforward, I turned back to page 3 and tugged on the covers to reveal the secret compartment in the middle of the book. This demonstration was met with a collective “Ah!” In an instant, the students realized their task had grown in complexity—and also in meaning. Upon explaining the significance of the special compartment, I continued with my example, suggesting that page 3 could feature an image of Paul D.’s memory tin. When opened via a cutout, the tin could reveal his “red, beating heart,” alive with suppressed emotions and remembrances. The booklet would show that despite appearances of having moved on, Paul D. carries his past everywhere, and until the rusted tin is opened, his heart is encased, unable to beat, to feel.

To help students understand the potential of the secret compartment, we brainstormed additional ideas. For example, the booklet could represent the significance of trees. Each page could feature a key occurrence of trees in the novel, such as the blossoms Paul D. followed on his way to freedom or the canopy of trees under which Denver retreated. In juxtaposition to these trees as a symbol of freedom or escape, the interior compartment could depict the chokecherry tree of scars on Sethe’s back, a testament of her years in slavery. Overall, the booklet would present the message that trees in the novel are indicative not of the attainment of freedom, but the mere illusion of it.

We then discussed the medium of collage, that it required them to tear, shred, and shape existing materials to create new objects or symbols. Students recognized that colors, textures, placement, and other design elements played an important role. I discouraged students from using ready-made images as is, particularly computer-generated visuals, because I did not want them to simply search, print, and paste pictures, circumventing the goals of the project: thinking, creating, representing, and meaning-making. The booklet should also contain words; however, students should not think of it as an essay. The text could range from captions offering direct explanation of the visuals to an original poem capturing the essence of the topic. Some students were quite uncomfortable at the broadness of the text requirement, seeing as they were used to writing for their grades. They repeatedly asked whether they should have text on each page, how much text, and so on. I encouraged them to do what helped convey their book’s meaning. (See Figure 1 for a sample assignment sheet.)
From the start, students were conscious of their artistic choices and conscientious about linking their decisions with specific aspects of the novel. This assured me that their creative process was rooted in an analysis or examination of the text and that the parts and details they depicted were chosen because they spoke to a larger issue or theme in the text. Leila, for example, used bright colors to represent Sethe's ostentatious phase, juxtaposing...
them with muted colors for her guilt-ridden phase. Winny elected to leave her depiction of Beloved faceless, to indicate the different representations this character takes on in the novel; she also intentionally used fragmented images to mirror Morrison's fragmentary storytelling.

A number of students drew ideas from prior literature circle activities. For instance, Nathan had not been content with the unresolved question from his group discussions of who Beloved really is. Toni Morrison had left many possibilities: Beloved as the incarnation of the baby ghost haunting 124; Beloved as Sethe’s baby and Denver’s sister returned from the other side; Beloved as the embodiment of the “sixty million and more” slaves in the book’s dedication. So Nathan decided to create a book capturing his interpretation of Beloved’s identity; he sought to make meaning about a key character through this project. Some other students drew on their work as Illustrator. Caroline used the booklet to further develop the blood-milk-tears imagery she had explored. Her recognition of the significance of the bodily fluids imagery had in fact been the subject of a rather lengthy discussion in her literature circle; so, when Kiara, an academically weaker student and member of Caroline’s group, needed an inspiration for her project, she borrowed this idea for her booklet exploring “The Symbolism of Liquids in Beloved.” In short, students grasped the opportunity to engage in analyses of characters, images, and themes.

In conferencing with students, I tried to ensure that their topic leveraged the given format, that the secret compartment would feature a deeper insight about the topic. Alice knew exactly what to depict on page 3 and in her secret compartment. In fact, she began by making a large cutout in the shape of a teardrop through which a river flowed. She intended to make a bridge spanning the river to represent Sethe and the other characters’ physical as well as metaphorical journey from slavery and the past, to freedom and the future.

Surprisingly, despite my reiteration, some students boldly carried on without having planned what would be in the interior. Paige was one of these students. She wanted to explore the symbols of trees and water. She committed the first two pages to representations of trees and had begun depicting water images on the last two pages; however, she had not yet determined how to link the two symbols and what to include in the hidden compartment. Nevertheless, Paige was confident that she would eventually make meaning. While instances like this concerned me and I tried to move the students toward a concrete idea through conferencing, I also validated students’ learning and artistic processes by giving them time and space to explore.

**Artful and Meaningful Products**

The resulting products were as diverse and original as the students themselves and the paths they chose (see Figures 2 and 3 for examples of completed projects). For example, I had advised students to use the secret compartment in juxtaposition with the other pages, but Bridget and Alice went further, contrasting the first two pages with the last two, and using the middle to depict a connecting idea, to act as a bridge, which in Alice’s case was literal. The applications of the elements and principles of design were also remarkable. For example, Ross consciously applied perspective, giving the impression that Beloved was reaching for Sethe in the middle compartment by making Beloved bigger. Meanwhile, LiSheng distinguished the spiritual world from the physical by covering items with a shimmering fabric. Moreover, Hannah oriented her book vertically; Sam boldly went beyond the boundaries of the page, while Jody bounded her book with a link of chains. I was able to identify something unique about each product.

The text the students included was also interesting. They generally offered a short explanation of key visuals. Sam wrote, “The water and trees represent the freedom that Sethe is about to reach. The water is the path that leads Sethe to freedom, while the trees that grow on the banks conceal her, and allow her safe passageway to freedom.” Other students opted to quote exclusively from the novel as if creating a found poem; a few actually wrote original poems:

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Beloved the Baby
Innocence gone
Crawling Already?
Freedom is won

Beloved the Woman
From water born
Shining with light
But inside all scorn . . . (Raisa)
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FIGURE 2. The completed booklet and pages of Leila’s project titled “The Chain of Guilt”
FIGURE 3. The completed booklet and pages of Bridget’s project titled “Beloved: The Physical Manifestation of Sethe’s Haunting Past”
In general, words were kept at a minimum, but a few read more like essays or detailed analysis of a symbol. In fact, some students, worried that their images would not convey meaning on their own, submitted a page of written explanation. I suspect that, in addition to being insecure about their artistic ability, some of these students found an English assignment without a written component particularly foreign, and so felt obliged to write an accompanying essay, despite knowing it was counter to the intent of the project.

I was most interested in how students handled page 3 and the secret compartment because the insight they nestled into the interior would indicate either a surface or deeper understanding of the novel. Many of the students were creative in making the page 3 cutout; keyholes, windows, heart, eyes, and a mask were some of the renderings. I remembered Paige and her conviction that she would find something significant to depict on page 3 and in the interior, and I wanted to check if she delivered. As I opened her booklet, “Connection between the Motifs of Trees and Water in Beloved,” I indeed experienced an aha moment. She had successfully linked the symbols of trees and water within a provocative image.

In equating trees with freedom and water with birth, then depicting human lungs next to the respiratory cycle of a tree, Paige’s booklet synthesized the significance of these two symbols into a profound metaphor.

As water causes trees to grow, the passion to live causes the characters to seek and attain physical-spiritual freedom. [Moreover] another image I tried to evoke in this picture is the connection between Sethe and her daughters. I tried to make the heads of Denver and Beloved [with symbols representing their connection to Sethe] like lungs to Sethe’s head to enforce the image that Sethe’s daughters are what she needs to live; they are like air to her. She says: “I wouldn’t draw breath without my children” (pp. 239–240).

While Paige achieved success in rendering the secret compartment meaningful, I was perplexed and sometimes disappointed in other students’ projects, particularly their use of the hidden compartment. I found myself wanting to better understand the students’ intentions. Instead of defaulting to a written explanation, however, I decided to hold a gallery walk of the booklets, during which I visited students and asked for a verbal explanation of their intended message and artistic choices. Doing so indeed deepened my understanding and helped me assess the students’ insights. For example, I had not understood why Jody depicted images of a tombstone labeled Beloved, a jail cell with Paul D., and a lock of hair in a heart floating in water in the secret compartment of her book titled “Crossing the River to Freedom” until she explicated the significance of each item, concluding, “All of these memories/images are used to represent the things that held Sethe back and did not allow her to . . . move ahead. They also represent how she was not a free woman and would always be a slave in her mind.” Jody’s book as a whole was a commentary on the illusion of freedom and the lasting effects of slavery. It juxtaposed the physical journey that Sethe has completed with the spiritual mending she has yet to embark on. This experience convinced me that my students were competent as both readers and artist-creators.

Another Layer of Meaning-Making

During the exhibition, students were prompted to describe and interpret at least one booklet. The responses were thoughtful, showing yet another layer of meaning-making. For instance, Evan and Jeff both wrote about Cory’s book titled “The Effects of Slavery in Toni Morrison’s Beloved”; yet whereas Evan thought Sethe was “celebrating” in the last two pages, Jeff thought Sethe donned a “sad face,” reflecting the inescapable oppression of slavery.

There are images of a female and a male working, sometimes on their knees, which I take to mean . . . Paul D. and Sethe working as slaves. . . . There is an image of a hand reaching for something, as if it cannot get what it wants. . . . This means that Paul D. has always wanted freedom and attempted to escape slavery, but never achieved [it]. The sun signifies a new beginning in Paul D.’s life when he escapes, and in the inside compartment, we see the path that Paul D. apparently took to freedom. The next page shows the house that Sethe now lives in, celebrating her life away from slavery. (Evan)

I see many images of a boy and a girl working in the field, which represent Paul D. and Sethe working during slavery. I see a hand reaching into the secret compartment, which is colored brown and
looks like abyss. To me, this symbolizes Paul D. searching for freedom. The hills seem to represent the path that Paul D. took on his journey to freedom. The rising sun at the peak of the hill represents the free life that Paul D. sees approaching. Last, Sethe's sad face and her house symbolize the "oppression of slavery that cannot be escaped." (Jeff)

In another example, Raisa shows profound understanding of themes and ability to interpret symbols in the text through examining Kristin's book:

Kristin's book is filled with different categories that water represents: Love, birth, freedom, yesterday, revelation, ever-changing. I think she gives water such strong representations because it is forever moving on, unlike Sethe, who is always consumed in the past. While Morrison does show some strength gained by past memories, the theme shows that an overwhelming connection is harmful. . . . While water may "reflect" the past, it is always moving and promoting life. Its movement has the freedom which slaves dreamed of, and because crossing the river meant more safety to Sethe, so does water continually alleviate her and other characters' pain. (Raisa)

**Student Reflections**

Finally, students had a chance to reflect on the project. I had consciously avoided the jargon "meaning-making," so I was surprised to see students use the term and allude to the concept, as in Leila's coined phrase "auto-discovery." She wrote, "Literature is something of which one's understanding cannot be fully explained to others through the use of a single medium. . . . The recipient of the experience can interpret the work for themselves and is not resigned to being told what the meaning is generally accepted to be. I think this sort of auto-discovery is a fun, personally meaningful, and permanent way to learn." Impressively, too, students seemed to recognize the connection between art and studying literature, how one could support the other. Hannah noted that "art and collaging . . . help [to] express the ideas of a very complex, abstract book," and Yvette realized that "reading about something is one thing but seeing it is another."

Students appreciated the project because it offered a break from the typical discussion and writing requirements of an AP course. At the same time, they recognized the task was rigorous and valuable. Specifically, several students remarked that while they had done other art-based projects, this particular one posed a unique and meaningful challenge. For example, Hannah felt that this project "related directly to the themes and motifs of the book, forcing us to organize our interpretations of it. It is not useless, like making a mask for the Romeo & Juliet ball."

Several students even recognized that the secret compartment booklet could be used to respond to AP exam-like essay topics; for instance, Hannah proposed that for the prompt "How does a character's past contribute to their present?" the first scene could be black and white with bold red blood, depicting Sethe's blocking of color. The second scene could represent community isolation, and the third about the stolen milk, which violated her motherhood. The secret compartment would be the link to overarching theme; the inside of the book could depict her past as a slave, becoming chains around her limbs on the middle page of the book.

In all, the insights into Beloved that students gained from working on the project were more than I could have hoped for. Justin exemplified this in his reflection:

I was surprised at the things I realized about the novel through doing this project. . . . I realize things like how Sethe, who runs away from Sweet Home, experiences extreme physical exhaustion, but she doesn't get mentally worn out like other characters do. . . . When I was deciding which characters to include, I realized that the book opens with Baby Suggs tired out in bed and closes with Sethe tired out in the same bed, though their fates after this scene may be different.

Overall, the exhibition, peer response, and reflection stood in place of a formal assessment. Instead of having the projects submitted to me, graded strictly, and returned, I opted to reward students for their creativity and participation not only in making the booklet but also in responding to each other's and further reflecting upon the text. All this validated my original intent, that this be fundamentally a project about individual meaning-making and insight.
Lesson Learned

By most accounts, the secret compartment book project was a success. The pure aesthetics of some of the booklets were impressive. Moreover, many of the insights students formulated about the novel impressed me. The distinctive format applied to an appropriately complex text supports students to explore multiple facets of characters, to link symbols or recurring motifs, and to contemplate themes and the overall message of the text, which are all desirable skills and outcomes in literature classes at any level and with any group of students. In light of students’ reflection that the project could even be used to explore or map out responses to essay topics, I venture that creative and visually based assignments such as this one could be valuable in helping students to develop ideas for use in a formal piece of analytical writing. In particular, struggling students and second language learners may find art-making an effective alternative way to communicate their understanding. The process and the resulting visuals could serve as concrete artifacts around which the teacher and the class could hold conversations. Visual responses can indeed have the “function of unlocking thoughts and feelings in response to literature, enabling us to stand back from the work itself and develop a sense of what we have not yet seen or an angle we have not previously considered” (Purves, Rogers, and Soter 149).

Despite the successes, I had some concerns. In particular, I wondered why some booklets, although beautiful, appeared vague in their message. Perhaps I should have provided more structure and guidelines. Perhaps I should have allocated group-work sessions for students to generate ideas and work out the message of significance for the interior compartment. Another way of ensuring that I would understand the author-artist’s intent without demanding more written text is to listen in as students returned to their literature circle groups to present their booklets. Or instead of prioritizing the author’s intent, I could encourage a more dynamic second layer of meaning-making by having group members interpret the author-artist’s work. This could also be achieved by having students write comments on sticky notes during the gallery walk and affixing them to each booklet. As students visit the exhibit, they could read the existing comments and add to the interpretation.

In all, the secret compartment book is a stimulating art-based project that challenges students to take an active role in making meaning. Through this assignment, my students made sense of more layers in the text than had been afforded through the literature circle discussions and other activities throughout the unit. Moreover, through the visual representation and sharing process, they began to shape each other’s understanding of the complex novel. My experience with the project has confirmed for me the benefits of integrating art-making into English classrooms. Thoughtful art-making projects not only extend students’ analytical skills; they also validate students as creative, meaning-making individuals.

Note

1. Unfortunately, I am unaware of the origin of the secret compartment booklet; however, an online source that provides a tutorial on how to fold the booklet can be found at http://myhandboundbooks.blogspot.com/2007/11/secret-fold-notebook.html.

Works Cited


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