

**WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 13, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION B 16:30-18:00**

Reader Response Theory and Holocaust Literature

*By
Samuel Totten*

Introduction

I am constantly attempting to develop new, powerful and pedagogically sound ways to teach about the Holocaust in social studies and English classes. In doing so, my general goal is to devise strategies/activities that will either assist the students in gleaning unique insights into the history of the Holocaust, illuminate the personal experiences of individuals during the Holocaust period, and/or leave them with something to ponder about hard and long. The latter is important for this history is not simply another piece of history; it has, I believe, immense ramifications in regard to who we are as people as well as what it means to live in a world where genocide has become rather commonplace.

Herein I discuss how I use reader response theory (which will be described shortly) to engage the students in a study of Dan Pagis' poem entitled "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car". It is a short but extremely thought-provoking poem that almost never fails to captivate the students' interest. The activity I have designed is ideal for a single period, and it is one that is sure to provoke strong and unique insights and connections vis-a-vis key issues germane to various aspects of the Holocaust. Ultimately, this exercise illustrates the unusual power that a thought-provoking poem in conjunction with the implementation of reader response theory can have in assisting students to gain a deeper understanding about various facets of the Holocaust.

At first, many students are puzzled by the "odd" poem; and indeed, some are put off by it. The students' initial response, though, frequently contributes to the revelatory insights that the students eventually glean from both the poem and the activity itself.

This poem and this activity is ideal for use in the social studies, history, or English classroom. They are also ideal for use in an interdisciplinary study of the Holocaust, one in which English and social studies teachers, for example, team up to teach a lesson or unit on the Holocaust. Contingent upon his/her goals, each teacher must decide whether there is a need to provide a historical context for the poem before conducting such an activity as described here. Providing or not providing a historical context will dramatically affect the students' interpretation of the poem. Some purists of reader response theory may, in fact, argue that students should not be provided with the historical context in that it would "inhibit", "limit" or "sway" the student's interpretation. On the other hand, purists of Holocaust education may very well argue – and understandably – that in order for students to gain the greatest insights into a literary work about the Holocaust, they need to understand the historical context of the literary work *prior* to attempting to interpret it.

It is the opinion of this author that, ultimately, in order to gain a better and deeper understanding of the Holocaust, as well as the literary work itself, students need, *at some point*, to be assisted in placing the events of the story in a historical context. This may very well be after the students have completed the reader response activity, and this is fine. The point, though, is that such a context will likely provide students with critical insights into the period of the piece, the large events taking place around the more telescoped events in the literary work, the conflict faced by the characters, the “choiceless choices” facing the characters, the setting, etc. All good literature can be understood on various and increasingly complex levels, and such contextualization may enable students and the teacher to more readily access and explore additional and more revealing levels of a literary work.

Pagis’ poem can be used to reach various goals and objectives and it can be used in various ways. For example, it could be used within a study of the Holocaust to enhance student understanding of certain facets of the history such as the issue of personal responsibility, the impact the Holocaust has on humanity, the culpability of perpetrators and bystanders, or the plight of victims. Or, it can simply be taught in an English classroom on its own merit as an outstanding piece of poetry. If the poem is taught within the context of a unit on the Holocaust then an ideal place to teach it would be during a discussion of the deportations of the Jews or during a focus on the issue of perpetrators, victims, collaborators and bystanders.

If a teacher is not teaching a lesson or unit on the Holocaust but wishes to provide a historical context for this poem, an efficient way of doing so is to have the students read a solid essay on the Holocaust (e.g., Niewyk’s “Holocaust: The Genocide of the Jews”) or the full text on the history of the Holocaust (.e.g., of Michael Berenbaum’s *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993). An alternative to using a text, and this is especially useful for those teachers with limited funds and time, is to show the film entitle “Genocide 1941-1945”, which is part of the World at War Series (Arts and Entertainment Hole Video, P.O. Box 2284, South Burlington, VT 05407). The latter relates the study of the destruction of European Jewry through the use of archival footage and testimony of victims, perpetrators and bystanders. Ideally, teachers will use an essay or two to supplement the information about the film. As for English teachers, they may wish to use the poem in conjunction with a novel, memoir (e.g., Elie Wiesel’s *Night*) and/or an essay on the history of the Holocaust.

Reader response theory activities such as the one described here can be used with virtually any poem, short story, novel or play. The key is to provide a forum for the students to personally react to a work from their own unique perspective, and to provide them with the opportunity to engage in an in-depth and thought-provoking dialogue with their peers and teacher. What is delineated here, then, is just one of innumerable ways to involve students in an engaging and, hopefully, revelatory discussion about a powerful piece of literature using reader response theory.

Reader Response Theory

Reader response theory is predicated on the idea that each reader comes to a piece of literature with a rich background of worldly experience and a broad knowledge base

in many different subjects. That simply means that most, if not all, readers will likely have unique insights into a piece of literature. That goes counter, of course, to those who perceive literary works as having a single, “correct” meaning or that the only “true” way to understand a literary work is by solely studying its symbolic structure, motifs, language, etc. As Louise Rosenblatt notes, reader response theorists believe the reader *should not be perceived* as “...a blank tape registering a ready-made message” (quoted in Sheridan, 1991, p. 804). Rather, he/she should be integrally and actively involved in wrestling with all aspects of the literary work in order to construct an understanding of it.

Thus, for a reader to get the most out of a work of literature, he or she must bring his/her own insights, knowledge base, and past experiences to bear on his/her reading of the literary work. Put another way, readers must “invest themselves in the experience”. This, of course, does not preclude the examination of symbolic structure, motifs, and other literary concerns. Indeed, many of the latter concerns are likely to arise in the reader’s initial and ongoing reaction to the story. In this way, a reader is constructing meaning as he or she wrestles with the poem, story or novel.

The Directions for the Activity

Initially, one should simply project the poem on an overhead. Alternatively, the teacher could photocopy the poem, and provide each student with his/her own copy:

Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car:

by
Dan Pagis

here in this carload
I am Eve
with Abel my son
if you see my other son
Cain son of man
tell him that I . . .

The exact directions given the students are as follows. “In your letter to Dan Pagis, the poet, you may write anything you wish about the poem. You may tell the poet what you like or dislike about the poem, what you don’t understand about it, that you don’t like it, and/or you may ask probing questions about the poem or even offer your own interpretation and insights. The point is, you may approach it in any way you wish. It is your perspective, your point of view that is important. Don’t write this for me, the teacher, write it for yourself in which you present your most honest response to the poem.”

Once any questions the students may have about the directions for the assignment is addressed, it is a good idea to ask: What does every letter begin with (the students will generally answer “the date” and “a salutation or greeting”). The students should also be asked; “And what do letters generally conclude with?”. Here the students usually answer with “a closing” and “your name”. If the teacher does not ask such questions, many students will neglect to set the assignment up in letter format.

Next, the students should be given fifteen to twenty minutes to write their letters. Initially, many students will either moan and groan and complain that they can't think of what to say. Allow the groaning but warn them not to say anything aloud at all about why they feel they do not have anything to say. That, and anything else they wish to comment on, should be reflected in their letters. As with any assignment, some students will finish in a matter of minutes, while others will still be writing once the fifteen to twenty minutes is up.

At the conclusion of the writing activity, students should be placed in groups of three to four, and given the following directions: "Initially, each person should simply read his/her letter while the rest of the group listens. Once everyone has read their piece, each person should read their letter again. This time, however, after each person reads their letter, a discussion should ensue. During the course of the discussion, the other members of the group are free to ask questions and make comments about the other person's letter; and in doing so, one may corroborate certain points by drawing on thoughts and feeling reflected in one's own letter and/or play the devil's advocate by questioning and probing. As you discuss the ideas in the various letters, be sure to keep returning to the poem in order to substantiate and clarify your ideas. As soon as the discussion of one person's letter wanes, the next person in line should read their letter and the process of discussion should begin anew.

I further explain that in order for the class to conduct a large group (e.g., class) follow-up discussion, it will be necessary for each group to have a recorder who jots down the most pertinent points made during the course of the small group discussion. That being the case, I ask each group to quickly decide who the recorder is going to be, and I ask for that individual to raise their hand. The latter ensures that each group has a recorder. After all of the recorders have been duly noted, I tell the students that during the general discussion the onus will not be on the recorder to carry the discussion for their group, but rather it will be the responsibility of the entire group to expound on their collective ideas. Thus, while the recorder will initially relate the key points that have been made in their group, any subsequent discussion of the group's points should be a group effort..

As the small groups engage in the aforementioned work, I circulate from group to group, and as a rule I simply listen to the discussion and refrain from making any comments. However, if an individual or an entire group is stuck at a point where they are simply saying "The poem doesn't make any sense", I offer the following advice and encouragement: "OK, that's a good starting point. Now you need to discuss *why* it doesn't make any sense. What aspects/components of the poem lead you to make that judgment. Start with that, and I assure you that your discussion will lead into some very interesting and fruitful areas". Once students broach their points, they should be encouraged to try to relate them to what that may tell use about the poem. With some groups it takes more encouragement and prodding than others, but by gently prodding and urging them to go with their initial reaction and then examine and wrestle with those, the students inevitably come up with some very interesting, and often perspicacious, insights.

A Presentation of the Activity

Herein I shall succinctly provide the reader with a sense of the various responses a group of tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade students came up with in a special college preparatory summer course held at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, for young people whose family members have never attended college. In doing so, I shall provide direct quotes from their letters and the type of discussion that ensued in the small and/or large groups. It should be understood that what follows is only a fraction of the period-long discussion that was engaged in by the students.

It is worth noting that the students who wrote these responses were engaged in a study of the Holocaust. It is not surprising, then, that some of the students directly related this poem to certain aspects of the Holocaust. That said, this poem generates fascinating and worthwhile discussion whether or not students are studying the Holocaust. If the students are not studying the Holocaust, it is interesting to see how they relate the poem to various historical periods. For example, in certain cases in the past students have related the poem to the slaves fleeing bondage via the Underground Railroad, the deprivation of human rights in South America, and some have tied it to the Holocaust.

Conclusion

Students are generally anxious for the teacher to tell them what the “meaning” of the poem is, or at least what the poet had in mind. In fact, during the small group discussions many students asked me what the author meant by the poem. I answered that I did not have *the* answer to that question, and that, together, we had to do our utmost to come up with our understanding of the poem.

What I do share with the students at the conclusion of the exercise is that Pagis was a Holocaust survivor. More specifically, I tell them that Dan Pagis was born in Bukovina (formerly part of Austria, then Romania, and finally Russia) in 1930, and that he spent his early years in a concentration camp in the Ukraine from which he escaped in 1944. I also share with them that eventually he settled in Israel where he became a well know poet, and that he died in 1986.