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AUTHOR Gmuca, Jacqueline L.
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ABSTRACT

The process of introducing students to alternative approaches and giving them the opportunity to debate their views about a work in order to develop critical thinking skills can start in the elementary school grades. George Hillocks' seven-level hierarchy represents an appropriate scheme by which teachers can sequentially move students to higher levels of critical thinking skills. The focus in this hierarchy is on two levels of comprehension: the literal and inferential, each with sub-levels. To illustrate this progression, works by Eloise Greenfield, an award-winning black author who has written a range of books for children, can be studied in the early grades. With the guidance of an experienced reader--the teacher--and a combination of freewriting at critical moments in the reading process followed by class discussion, the elementary school child can be given the foundation for more complex ways of viewing literature. In later grades, the student will be able to move through Hillocks' final three levels, noticing the patterns of imagery or of parallel characters, determining the work's overall meaning, and relating the structure of the text to other elements of the work. (Twelve references are attached.) (KEH)

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READING, WRITING, AND THINKING:
THF WORK OF ELOISE GREENFIELD
AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Jacqueline L. Gmuca

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READING, WRITING, AND THINKING: THE WORK OF ELOISE GREENFIELD AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Several years ago, I had a student in a college-level composition and literature course who "insisted" on writing plot summaries in place of literary analyses. No matter how much time I had spent in class brainstorming ideas and looking at different approaches, she still did no more than retell the plot. Finally, in a conference, she tried to express her difficulty. It was not that she had not read the story. She had, in fact, several times. But in thinking about the work, she could not move beyond the literal events of the plot and so was failing English 102.

My student's plight is just one illustration of the difficulties cited by the 1979-80 Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading and Literature. This assessment team found American students generally able to comprehend literature on a literal level, and make " 'preliminary interpretations' " but unable "to support or explain their interpretations and responses to literature in any but the most superficial ways." Indeed, the report cited a general difficulty among students in terms of finding evidence to support their interpretations and a strong satisfaction with their preliminary views, often untested by the literary work itself (Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen 1). Unfortunately, my student had never progressed to even the preliminary interpretation stage, finding her view of the literary work bounded by its literal details of plot action.

To increase the ability of my student and others like her to think about and discuss literature, the Assessment Report outlined a number of steps, including classroom opportunities for

students to defend their interpretations, both in speaking and writing, and an emphasis on critical thinking skills so that students could explore alternative ways of looking at texts and finding support for their views (Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen 3).

Incorporating the first of these recommendations is relatively easy to accomplish. Teachers can increase the number of opportunities for students to defend their views without significantly changing the curriculum. But how does one choose the most appropriate scheme for increasing critical thinking skills? Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen maintain that of the various hiearchies available, the one developed by Hillocks holds the most promise. Unlike the theories of others, Hillocks seven-level scheme has been supported by empirical testing (4). Indeed, a study that Hillocks and Ludlow conducted on groups of graduate students as well as 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th graders showed the levels to be hiearchically arranged and "taxonomically related to each other" (22). In a follow-up discussion of research data, Hillocks and Ludlow recommend that teachers locate the level(s) at which their students are operating and then sequentially move them to higher levels. All too often, the opposite occurs in the classroom with the teacher's questions springing from higher levels that students are not yet ready to handle. Frustration, on both the students' and instructor's parts, inevitably occurs (23).

In brief, Hillocks' hiearchy focuses on two levels of comprehension: the literal and inferential. On the literal

level, students move from identifying information central to the story to identifying key details, upon which the "twists and turns" of the plot often rest, and finally, to locating information, directly stated in the text, which reflects the relationship between two pieces of information. Four sub-levels comprise the second part of Hillocks' scheme, the inferential level. First, the student infers relationships which are not directly stated by the text. Second, she juxtaposes a number of details to infer "various patterns or sets of relationships." The next level involves the student's assessment of the author's perception or generalization about the subject at hand, and lastly, the parts of a work are analyzed to see how certain effects are achieved (Hillocks 56-57).

Focusing on this latter inferential level of critical thinking skills, Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen have designed a number of sequenced activities for the secondary level classroom. But perhaps this process of introducing students to alternative approaches to literature and the opportunity to debate their views about a work needs to begin even earlier in the middle and elementary school grades. In starting with these early grades, however, I am in no way suggesting that the primary aim of enjoying literature, a goal underscored by Huck, Hepler, and Hickman (633), be de-emphasized. Enjoyment of literature needs to be focused on, but such enjoyment can very naturally lead to students' experiencing a work from a variety of perspectives. What I am recommending, then, is that students in the elementary and middle school grades can be encouraged to move through Hillocks' first four levels, starting with the recognition of

details basic to the story and ending with inferences of the relationships between two pieces of information.

To illustrate this progression, I will be using the works of Eloise Greenfield, an award-winning Black author who has written a range of books for children, including realistic fiction, picture books, biographies, memoirs, and poetry. As a vehicle for encouraging students to express their understanding about her stories and poems, a series of graduated freewriting responses will be presented.

Growing out of the writing across the curriculum movement, freewriting has emerged as a central way of thinking on paper. Due to its very nature--prose which is rapidly written in a short time span without attention paid to grammatical correctness--freewriting provides unique opportunities for students to engage in the type of writing Britton defines as expressive (Freisinger 4). Distinct from transactional and poetic writing, expressive language has as its aim students' understanding of a particular text in light of their own experiences. Ironically, the leading textbooks in the field of children's literature neglect the role of freewriting in their discussions of literature programs. It is true that Huck, Hepler, and Hickman describe a number of literature-based writing activities, among them diaries written from a character's perspective, lists of figurative language used by authors, and surveys of reading interests. But nowhere in their textbook is writing as a vehicle for exploring ideas about a work of literature discussed. A similar lack occurs in Children and Books which highlights creative writing activities

such as telling the story from one character's viewpoint and composing an informational photo-essay. At one point, Sutherland, Monson, and Arbuthnot suggest that older children keep a diary of their reactions to each book read, but the types of reactions encouraged revolve around aspects liked or disliked about individual books (540-541). Such personal evaluations are excellent starting points for the development of critical thinking skills, yet the authors of Children and Books see them only as ending rather than beginning points.

One does not always have to begin with a personal reaction to the story itself; in fact, many researchers recommend an emphasis on the text's subject matter as a prelude to the story to follow (Clifford 5; Kahn et al 22). Such a freewriting assignment could introduce Greenfield's picture book, Grandmama's Joy, to students in an elementary classroom. The story revolves around a non-traditional family of a grandmother and granddaughter confronted with the necessity to move from their home, a situation familiar to many children. Yet Greenfield's emphasis on the grandmother's feelings rather than the child's might be difficult for many children to relate to. Thus, a focus on the subject-matter of the story rather than a reaction to the events themselves might be a more effective introduction to the book. Having children write for ten minutes on their own families or on the times when they have had to move away from their homes and then share these responses would evoke all the feelings of love, security, regret, and pain embodied by the story as well. Such a focus is highly appropriate to Greenfield's own aims as a writer, for in her works she strives

to reflect the staples of strength and love in Black families, elements missing in the media's portrayal during the 1970's. "The mirror that they hold up for children is a carnival mirror," she emphasized in a 1975 speech for the International Reading Association, "a fun house mirror, reflecting misshapen images, exaggerated or devalued as the needs of situation comedy demand" (626). What Greenfield seeks to hold up instead is a highly realistic image which reflects hope and affirmation.

Part of that realism is the unmistakeable sadness felt by the grandmother at having to leave her home of many years with its "good kitchen feelings" and memories. Her granddaughter, Rhondy, like ourselves, does not know the source of her sadness until the climax of the plot and its turning toward resolution. Detailing the evidence for this sadness could form the basis of a second freewriting response. Presenting the first twelve pages of the picture book through reading the text outloud and showing the illustrations, the teacher could then interrupt the reading process, asking children to write down how the grandmother feels in the opening of the story and how Rhondy knows she feels that way. Recognizing and detailing that sadness addresses the first level on Hillocks' hierarchy: the location of information basic to the story while preparing the reader for the plot's climax. Once the reading is resumed and the grandmother reveals that they will have to move, an event occurs which appears to be totally out of context with the storyline. Immediately after her grandmother's tears and her own worries about moving away, Rhondy asks that her grandmother tell again the story of how she was

found, alive in the hospital after her parents had been killed in a car accident. To an adult reader, Rhondy's purpose in recalling the story is clear ; she was seeking to reassure her grandmother that they were each other's comfort and joy and that no matter how much destruction they encountered, they still had their love for one another. Such a purpose, however, would not be as clear to an elementary school child, without a third freewriting assignment after the remainder of the book is read, asking what Rhondy did to make her grandmother happier and why that action had such an effect. This last freewriting assignment would move the student through the second and third levels of Hillocks' hiearchy--a statement of a key detail and a recognition of the relationship between the detail and the resolution of the plot. That relationship is aptly stated in Greenfield's last sentence; Rhondy "felt so happy in her grandmama's arms because as much as she was Grandmama's joy, Grandmama was her joy, too."

For older readers, Greenfield's realistic novels, Talk About a Family and Sister, or one of her biographies, such as Paul Robeson, could be used to elicit responses. Again, the initial freewriting should revolve around either the subject-matter of the work (whether it be marriage and divorce, relationships with one's sisters and brothers, or times when one has been forbidden to do something) or a personal reaction to the story. Writing about this latter, highly emotional response to a work, Sutherland, Monson, and Arbuthnot emphasize that such a statement is not a lower-level one but at the very heart of interpretation and evaluation (505). I would like to expand their emphasis to include a personal reaction to the subject matter as well, for in

each instance students are tapping their own experiences and feelings. Subsequent freewriting assignments could highlight information basic to the story, such as Larry's homecoming in Talk About a Family and what Genny feels his return will accomplish. The movement of that story's plot depends on two key details--the signs spelling out the word "ugly" that Genny's younger sister, greatly disturbed over her parents' fights, puts up around the house and Genny's talk with her neighbor about a broken lamp. However, the relationship between these events and subsequent ones--the parents' decision to separate and Genny's acceptance of her family's new shape--is never directly stated, although strongly implied. Freewriting assignments at these points, then, could move students to Hillocks' fourth level, inferences about the relationship between two pieces of information in a text.

At this point, I would like to stress that freewriting is only one vehicle for increasing students' ability to critically respond to a text. Certainly, small group as well as entire class discussions are needed where individual responses are read, listened, and reacted to by other class members. In such a setting, the teacher needs to abandon her or his role as an authoritative figure, possessing the "right" knowledge, to become a guide or mentor, leading students to an increasingly more complex view of the literary text. The need for this role reversal has been stressed time and again. As Rosenblatt details, the relationship between reader and text is an active one, with the reader's experiences and perceptions creating the

work's meaning and continually changing in the process of this creation (34). Students learn to analyze a work, then, not by listening to the teacher talk about it, but "by experiencing texts and responding to them with nurturing by a concerned and more experienced reader" (Tchudi 250).

With that experienced reader, the teacher, and a combination of freewriting at critical moments in the reading process followed by class discussion, the elementary school child can lay the foundation for more complex ways of viewing literature. In later grades, she will be able to move through Hillocks' final three levels, noticing the patterns of imagery or of parallel characters, determining the work's overall meaning, and relating the structure of the text to other elements of the work. Indeed, had my student had such a basis, she would not have struggled so in Eng. 102, caught in a maze of literal details, unable to see one element of more significance than another.

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