From Sheryl Crow to Homer Simpson: Literature and Composition through Pop Culture

High school teacher Jerome Evans makes popular culture an integral part of his courses. Through analyzing themes in song lyrics, rhetorical devices in essays and advertisements, and psychology in contemporary film, students improve their skills in critical thinking and writing.

In her book Stiffed, about the betrayal of men by contemporary American culture, Susan Faludi refers to the 1950s science fiction film The Incredible Shrinking Man, finding in the film’s protagonist a metaphor for the role of the middle-class white American male (30–32). Similarly, in Backlash, as she explores what has happened to feminism in recent decades, she alludes to Fatal Attraction, Overboard, and Pretty Woman, again finding apt metaphors in artifacts from 1980s popular culture for “the undeclared war against American women” (112–38). Whether one agrees with Faludi or not, most readers agree that she is an excellent researcher and sociologist examining gender roles in America, at least partially by examining the popular culture. References to the films serve two purposes: to give the reader a way into reasonably difficult ideas and to examine elements of the contemporary American zeitgeist to see how cultural artifacts reflect essential ideas and concepts. Popular culture has an important place in the English classroom—as an object worthy of study and as a means for students to access and study literature successfully.

Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon find a similar use for popular culture in teaching college-level composition. In the introduction to Signs of Life in the U.S.A.: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers, they argue that examining popular culture—semiotic analysis—is “what analytic writing is about: going beyond the surface of a text or issue toward an interpretation” (9). They further assert that students generally possess skills needed to decode signs around them (traffic signs, behaviors among friends and acquaintances, stereotypical gender images), which essentially are the same skills needed to develop coherent and convincing arguments in writing. I accept their thesis and use popular culture in my high school classes.

From the poster of Gary Larson’s “Moona Lisa” that greets students as they enter the classroom, to our discussing popular songs as poetry, to our screening of the Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd classic, “What’s Opera, Doc?” at the end of a unit on Norse mythology, popular culture plays an integral part in the teaching and learning of literature and composition in the courses I offer.

American Literature and Pop Culture

I begin the fall semester of American Literature with juniors by listening to Don Henley’s 1989 hit song “The End of the Innocence” and Sheryl Crow’s more recent “Soak Up the Sun.” I give students a list of nine prominent and persistent themes in American literature: the search for identity, individualism, freedom, the journey, initiation/rite of passage, the frontier, moral struggle, rebellion versus conformity, and the American Dream/Nightmare. After a brief discussion, I show the students how Henley’s song develops several of these themes.
They recognize almost immediately the initiation theme in the title, and they see how the American Dream is corrupted into a nightmare in the opening stanza where an idyllic childhood ends with the father leaving the family. Students see the same theme in the references to the Reagan administration in the third stanza and once again in the lament for the loss of small-town America in the song’s final stanza. Students also recognize themes of moral struggle, freedom, the journey, and the frontier in the song lyrics. And while the students do not know it yet, Henley’s song serves as a metaphor for the junior year in high school.

We discuss next the themes they find in Sheryl Crow’s song. Students identify moral struggle—the conflict between materialism and emotional fulfillment—as a prominent theme in the song. They also say the song’s refrain speaks to them about freedom. In one class, students thought the part about his “fancy ride” and her “key” might constitute sexual euphemism and the song might be at least partially about gender roles and individual empowerment, not just about having fun on the beach as the refrain seems to indicate. This idea led to a discussion of gender roles and gender equity (or lack thereof) in contemporary America—not a bad way to start the school year.

I then invite the students to bring to class songs they enjoy that develop at least two of the themes. They work with a partner, provide the lyrics for the class, and identify specific lines in the song lyrics that demonstrate themes. During the next several class periods, we listen to two or three songs, and the students tell their classmates and me which themes they find in their songs. By showing the connection between a selected theme and specific lines in the song lyrics, they engage in creative thinking about literature (I tell them this later in the course) in much the same way they will when using quoted passages to support their assertions in academic writing about the literature we study. We also discuss how these themes are interrelated. For instance, one might engage in a moral struggle to find one’s identity during life’s journey as does Huck Finn, whom the students discuss later when we read Twain’s novel.

This year, the students were impressed by how many of the songs they had chosen contained the themes of search for identity and rebellion versus conformity. We discussed how popular music usually expresses the concerns, wishes, or desires of the composer, who is probably reflecting what he or she sees going on in life and culture. If this is true for a popular medium like music, I asked them, is it possible that this is also what takes place in the more serious literature that will provide the core of our course? Some sat silently when I asked that question, while others said “Yes,” while still others said, “Well, duh!”

Students find it pretty easy to provide specific evidentiary support from the text of the song, at least in part because they have better familiarity with popular songs (even ones they haven’t heard before) than they do with poetry or fiction or drama. And, later in the course, when we discuss thematic development in core works—The Crucible, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Great Gatsby, Lost in Yonkers, Death of a Salesman—the students find greater success at identifying themes and showing how they are developed because they have already done so with popular music. Figure 1 gives examples of several songs and American literary themes the students brought to class to discuss.

When we read Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, students easily identify themes from the list above that Miller develops in his play, especially John Proctor’s moral struggle. Also, when I ask them in the next week to write a paragraph discussing a theme in one of several contemporary Native American poems we read, they successfully use specific lines from the poem to show thematic development. And several students were very surprised this year to find ideas from Emerson and Thoreau in the songs they listen to—they had no idea that post-punk rock or rap music could be so transcendentalist.

Thus, popular culture has a definite place in high school English courses. Artifacts of pop culture serve as advanced organizers for students, who can then connect new material (prominent and persistent themes in American literature) to their own experiences with literature (song lyrics). Once they see that songwriters and performers develop themes in the music they enjoy, discovering those themes (and, of course, others) in literature new to them is simply not so difficult.
From Sheryl Crow to Homer Simpson: Literature and Composition through Pop Culture

FIGURE 1. Songs and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SONG TITLE</th>
<th>ARTIST</th>
<th>THEMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The Middle”</td>
<td>Jimmy Eat World</td>
<td>search for identity, rebellion versus conformity, individualism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m Just a Kid”</td>
<td>Simple Plan</td>
<td>search for identity, American Dream/Nightmare, initiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ReArranged”</td>
<td>Limp Bizkit</td>
<td>freedom, journey, initiation, individualism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Say I”</td>
<td>Creed</td>
<td>search for identity, freedom, frontier, moral struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Hope You Dance”</td>
<td>Leanne Womack</td>
<td>search for identity, moral struggle, freedom, journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Changes”</td>
<td>2Pac</td>
<td>rebellion versus conformity, moral struggle, journey, freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Fake Sound of Progress”</td>
<td>Lost Prophets</td>
<td>American Dream/Nightmare, individualism, moral struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Complicated”</td>
<td>Avril Lavigne</td>
<td>search for identity, rebellion versus conformity, freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Drive”</td>
<td>Incubus</td>
<td>rebellion versus conformity, freedom, journey, individualism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When God-Fearin’ Women Get the Blues”</td>
<td>Martina McBride</td>
<td>rebellion versus conformity, moral struggle, freedom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

enjoy, discovering those themes (and, of course, others) in literature new to them is simply not so difficult.

Writing through Pop Culture

In addition to using artifacts from popular culture as advanced organizers, I also use popular culture as a model for students’ writing. My junior honors students read selections from The Compact Reader, which were originally published in various periodicals, making them artifacts of popular culture. Russell Baker’s “The Plot against People” provides an excellent example of a pop culture essay because it discusses how “[i]nanimate objects are classified scientifically into three major categories—those that don’t work, those that break down and those that get lost” and how “[t]he goal of all inanimate objects is to resist man and ultimately to defeat him” (173). The students become engaged with a lively and humorous examination of everyday, familiar objects and gain a perspective about essay writing that seems quite new to them—writers do not compose essays to torture high school students; rather, writers compose essays to examine the world around them and try to make some sense of it (or at least make a few humorous observations). With this essay, the class reviews the rhetorical devices we studied in the writings of the colonial and revolutionary periods. Students see very quickly how and why Baker personifies the inanimate objects, how effectively he employs parallel structure, to what humorous effect he uses a mock-serious tone as well as “scientific” diction and, perhaps most importantly, how he uses specific examples to support his thesis.

Throughout the years that I have taught high school juniors, I have noticed the difficulties they have in finding and using specifics to support their
ideas. In a discussion of why fast food is less than healthy, junior students will write about hamburgers' having high fat content. What they write after reading and discussing Baker's essay runs more along these lines: "The typical American flies down Interstate 25 at 80 mph in his Isuzu Trooper, happily clogging his arteries with his McDonald's Cholesterol Burger, while chatting (with a mouth full) on his Nokia cell phone, closing the sale for 100 million widgets just before pulling off the freeway to arrive only 10 minutes late to his daughter's soccer match." As I teach my students, the specifics make the difference between telling and showing, between almost interesting and engaging the reader, and between earning a 7 or a 9 on the Advanced Placement Language and Composition Exam.

Appletree Rodden's essay, "Why Smaller Refrigerators Can Preserve the Human Race," offers students a different view of contemporary living. The title alone invites the reader to take a careful look at the social and psychological "costs" of technology. When the students read how small farmers have been displaced by agribusiness corporations like "Eggs Incorporated, a firm operated out of Los Angeles that produces 200,000 eggs a day from chickens that are kept in gigantic warehouses lighted artificially on an eighteen-hour light-and-dark cycle and produce one-and-a-half times as many eggs—a special breed of chickens who die young and insane." (278), they see again the power of specific details as well as a careful examination of cause-and-effect relationships on a very basic level—eating. Later in the course, when we discuss Neil Postman's _Amusing Ourselves to Death_ and a selection from Eric Schlosser's _Fast Food Nation_, students examine more deeply how these social critics support their assertions with carefully selected specifics that provide maximum impact on the reader. Through reading essays about popular culture, the students examine the contemporary world in which they live, including secondary "messages" from media, the "hidden" agendas of politicians and marketers, and the conveniences and complications advancing technologies offer. With these ideas in mind, the students are more ready to write convincingly about issues or concerns they see in the culture around them.

Having studied basic rhetoric through the types of essays discussed above as well as the speeches of revolutionary figures such as Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson, presidential inaugural speeches, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," students compose a pop culture essay using the rhetorical devices we have examined. Here are several titles of essays they produced:

- Tall Women in High Heels
- 'Tis the Season to be Spending
- Lipstick and Cleavage
- Our Superbly Sinful Society
- To Read This Essay, Press One
- Murphy's Law: My Constant Companion
- Politically Correct Free Speech
- Youth Culture for Sale
- Romance in the Time of Recession
- Women and Shoes and Other Mysteries of Life

Patty, in her essay "Youth Culture for Sale," asserts, "Every day we youth are melted down, stripped of our money and any useful demographic we might possess, and then repackaged and traded to another nameless face in the mass herd of corporate high rollers." She then discusses how so few people have such great control over media (five media conglomerates), clothing, and even food (as Schlosser points out, only thirteen meatpacking companies slaughter, package, and deliver all the meat in the US). She discusses the societal and personal impact of this control: "We are living in a society devoid of true free-will. Our new surrogate mothers are bailing forty-somethings whose 'Easy Rider' America has been transformed into nothing more than a trap for teens." In addition to practicing effective parallelism in her sentences, Patty includes specific names of companies, specific brands of clothing, and specific scenarios involving teens and their viewing, listening, and buying habits, showing a cause-and-effect relationship between manipulator and manipulated, between corporation and consumer. Patty concludes:

But the ultimate dupe-ride is one we were put on at birth by society. It is a trip far too great to simply

As I teach my students, the specifics make the difference between telling and showing, between almost interesting and engaging the reader, and between earning a 7 or a 9 on the Advanced Placement Language and Composition Exam.
take in the 'bitch-seat' of life's side-car cycle. We must first be blindly led to our sensing premiers by nameless corporations. Our first movie must be a movie they produced, our first record must belong to a band which they created, and our sense of people's and an individual's place must be first categorized by them [corporate manipulators]. All of these actions ensure a society of predictable youth. If we need a rebellion they create it for us. If we need a martyr, they sketch one out. We have a system to calculate what we will want, think, and feel at any given time. What more could we ask for?

Alysse employs similar rhetoric in "Tall Women in High Heels." Her essay reveals her self-confidence, not just in what she says, but also through the way she makes her point. After discussing how many times she has been told how tall she is, she states:

The sometimes too obvious reactions and comments about my "abnormal" height however, no longer deter me from wearing what I want to wear or towering over whomever I please, even all those short guys. If any rude comments are made about my height, such as, "Look out, it's the attack of the 50 foot woman," I assume that little person who made the comment has a brain capacity to match his size.

Note how she uses parallel structure to reflect her self-confidence. She goes on to say, "A tall woman . . . is aided by the power that is suggested with her image. It is not so easy to walk all over a woman who could literally walk all over a shorter man." Her juxtaposition of metaphoric and literal language in the essay's structure helps to make her point strong and clear—a sign of the maturity of her writing. Alysse concludes her discussion of gender, image, and confidence by stating, "So, whenever I am approached by somebody who stands amazed by my height and happens to question why I'm sporting stilettos that make me even taller, I simply reply, 'Why not?'

"Would You Like Fries With That?" also uses elements of pop culture to examine the nutrition habits, or lack thereof, of today's Americans. In particular, John's use of specific information makes his essay work:

Let's consider eating for an entire day at McDonald's. Based on the McDonald's USA Nutrition Facts website, for breakfast, a Steak and Egg Cheese Bagel has a measly seven hundred calories and thirty-five grams of fat. A 16-oz orange juice adds only another hundred and eighty calories. Let's have a Big Mac with Super Fries and a small Sprite for lunch. They have a combined total of one thousand three hundred and fifty calories. For dinner, a quarter-pounder with cheese, and, of course, the fries and a Coke add another thousand two hundred and ninety to the daily calorie total. Then, of course, an M&M McFlurry comes next for another six hundred and thirty calories. On that day, 4,150 calories and 180 grams of fat have been consumed. So much for the 2,000 calorie diet.

Note John's effective use of the passive voice in the next-to-last sentence, strongly suggesting that the consumer is certainly passive about his health and nutrition. The specific statistics strengthen the point, especially when coupled with his subtle sarcasm.

The students who wrote these passages are bright, insightful, and motivated, but they just don't write this effectively on assignments related to literature. However, the practice with specifics and rhetorical structures they gain when writing about pop culture topics does help them to write more completely and convincingly about literary topics as they progress through the course.

Psychology in Literature/Mythology and Pop Culture

In Psychology in Literature/Mythology, I want my senior students to develop their ability to find connections among the literature we study and the lives they lead. Rather than have them memorize lists of Greek gods and goddesses, I try to engage them to see that the hero concept from Homer's Iliad—hubris, atê, and nemesis—operates in contemporary American life as importantly as Freud's ideas of the unconscious and libido or Jung's concepts of archetypes and the collective unconscious. So, in the fall semester we study the psychological philosophies of Freud, Jung, Kohlerberg, and Frankl in works as varied as Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, Peter Weir's film The Year of Living Dangerously, Bernard Malamud's The Assistant, and Shakespeare's Hamlet and The Tempest. We examine personality structures, archetypal symbols and patterns, moral development in characters, and making meaning in one's life. When we come to the spring semester's focus on
mythology, students are conversant with these ideas, so we can effectively explore myth as a means of explaining the world around us. Before psychology we had mythology—and we still do have mythology, not only in ancient stories, but also in contemporary science, including psychology and sociology.

Peter Weir’s 1982 film *The Year of Living Dangerously*, for example, allows students to examine character development from Lawrence Kohlberg’s focus on moral development as well as from Jung’s concept of archetypes. Furthermore, the character Billy Kwan spends most of the film trying to make meaning not only of his own life but also of the lives of thousands of poverty-stricken Indonesians who live in a corrupt society led by shallow and vain leaders who allow their nation to be exploited by Western businessmen, politicians, and journalists. This one film, an artifact of popular culture, offers students an opportunity to use terms they have learned in conjunction with Jung, Kohlberg, and Frankl and see these psychologists’ concepts in action, so to speak. When students tell me they can no longer watch movies without seeing symbols or Jungian concepts, I think I have done a good job teaching.

As stated above, one primary goal in the spring semester mythology course is to help students find relevance between ancient stories and contemporary life. By reading stories from various mythologies, students begin to see the truth of Jung’s concepts of the collective unconscious and archetypes. Thus, students become adept at identifying patterns like the search for the father as seen in “Perseus,” “Arrow Boy,” “Finn and the Salmon of Wisdom,” and films such as *Blade Runner* and *Smoke Signals*. Students begin to interpret the importance of archetypal patterns, characters, and symbols in the various stories we read and eventually in reading of their choosing.

In Chris Eyre’s film *Smoke Signals*, based on Sherman Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, for instance, Thomas Builds-the-Fire creates/re-creates the world in which he lives through storytelling (for example, the story of 100 Indians and 50 pieces of fry bread). As we discuss this aspect of the film, students remind me of how important storytelling was in the myths of the Norsemen, especially as seen in *Beowulf* and Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “A.D. 991.” Students also point out many archetypes in the story, including the young man’s search for his father, the baptismal functions of fire and haircutting, and the mythic importance of salmon.

Through research projects, students explore connections between mythology and contemporary life. Students have demonstrated how advertisers use archetypal images of women—especially the Virgin and the Seductress—to market everything from cigarettes and alcohol to cosmetics and milk. Joni and Maria examined the concept of Fate as presented in Homer’s *Iliad* with the role of Fate in recent films, showing, for instance, that the Greek Fates, the Norse Norns, and the three precognitives of Minority Report have a great deal in common. Clark’s research focused on how contemporary comic books—*Thor*, *Spiderman*, *X-Men*—borrow concepts about heroes and valor, trickster characters, and Ragnarok from Norse mythology. In each research project, students engaged in scholarly research, finding connections between the mythological world and their own.

### Critical Thinking and Writing

Popular culture definitely has an important place in contemporary English curricula. Artifacts of popular culture can serve as advanced organizers with which students can synthesize ideas new to them. Students can more readily practice critical-thinking skills—supporting assertions with specific evidence—by showing how selected lyrics develop a theme in a song they know than they can in a novel or poem they are reading for the first time. Let them practice critical-thinking skills with familiar material, and they will be better equipped to tackle literature new to them and discover ideas they have never thought of before.

Students also successfully develop their writing skills through topics related to and models from popular culture. Whether they write descriptive essays, poetry, critical analyses of social issues, or explications of theme in a novel or play, the skills they need to be confident and competent writers are the same skills they have developed through interacting with their popular culture. The skills students use to ascertain who their real friends are or what a stop sign means or the irony that *The Simpsons* may be the most realistic program on television are the same.
skills that make good writing. When we as teachers help our students see this, they will become more confident and competent in their writing because we legitimize what they already know as we ask them to explore something new to them.

Teachers in ancient Greece used to beat their students for writing rather than memorizing their lessons, reflecting the technological change from an oral literary tradition to a written one. Perhaps we live in a period of similar technological change, with America becoming a postliterate society. Perhaps our newer forms of storytelling—the Internet, television, film, popular music—are every bit as important to twenty-first-century literature as was the novel to the nineteenth century. If so, then we should help students understand them. Every form of storytelling not only entertains but also reflects the society that produced it. In one sense, weren't today's "classics" that we teach without question at one time artifacts of a previous popular culture? The publishing histories of novels like The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Grapes of Wrath, or Johnny Got His Gun certainly suggest that these works were not always part of the traditional canon of American literature. It makes sense, too, that Homer's Iliad and The Odyssey are long-lasting artifacts of ancient Greek popular culture. So, when we study The Odyssey in mythology class, why not study it as the foundation of Western literature and culture that it is and also enjoy newer versions as well through the Coen brothers' O Brother, Where Art Thou? or even The Simpsons' version, with Homer as Odysseus?

Popular culture is popular for a reason. It plays an important role in the daily lives of students and definitely deserves a place in the English classroom.

**Works Cited**


---

**Jerome Evans** teaches English at Sandia High School in Albuquerque, New Mexico. *email: evans.m@aps.edu.*

---

**EJ 25 Years Ago**

Finding Understanding in the Popular

The emotional response to a Beatles lyric can lead to ways of seeing action of language and image in poetry. Watching violence in a film can be a new way of looking at yourself, or at the way others use your emotions to manipulate you. The popular, the experiential, is an opening into the understanding of the nature of literature.