To Search for Enlightenment: Responding to *Siddhartha* through Paint and Poetry

To encourage creative thinking, high school teacher Kelly Courtney-Smith asked her students for creative responses to Hesse’s novel, using a technique she learned from coauthor Michael Angelotti. Students painted or wrote poems interpreting their reading, then responded to the creations of their classmates. The students found that these “collaborative activities provided insights into the novel, their classmates, and their paintings and poems.”

_Siddhartha had begun to feel the seeds of discontent within him._

—Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*

The seeds of discontent began to sprout within me (Kelly) during my fifth year of teaching high school honors English. I had unintentionally strayed from my personal teaching mission: to help students learn reading, writing, and thinking skills in meaningful and creative ways. In preparing honors students for the challenging courses and Advanced Placement tests they faced in the future, I had placed too much emphasis on mastery of skills and not enough on personal engagement and meaning. Resolved to ameliorate this imbalance, I searched for teaching practices that would foster students’ “vital experience of literature” (Rosenblatt 58) and awaken their latent creative writing skills.

I discovered inspiration in a teaching composition course offered by Professor Michael Angelotti at the University of Oklahoma. We used freewrites (stream-of-consciousness writing) and freepaints (spontaneous, intuitive painting) to unleash our imaginations. We wrote, painted, swapped paintings and wrote poetic responses to each other’s paintings, and exchanged poems and painted responses to each other’s poetry. This process liberated me; splashing and dripping bright colors across the canvas freed my innate but dormant creative voice. Feeling rejuvenated and inspired, I decided to share this experience with my high school students.

I connected the painting and writing process with Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, one of the required texts in the tenth-grade honors curriculum. The novel and process worked well together because they involved exploring the self, reflecting on life experiences, and searching for enlightenment. I also selected several poems (see fig. 1) for students to read that connected with main themes from *Siddhartha*.

I wanted students to explore the connections between visual and verbal expression; better understand the literary text, responses to the texts, and themselves; and exercise their analytical skills and understanding of important literary terms. My teaching goals were to build classroom community; nurture student voice and creative writing ability; and improve reading, writing, and thinking skills.

**FIGURE 1.** Selected Poems for the *Siddhartha* Unit

W. H. Auden, “The Unknown Citizen”
Robert Peter Tristram Coffin, “Crystal Moment”
Emily Dickinson, “Much Madness Is Divinest Sense”
Edward Field, “Icarus”
Philip Larkin, “Next, Please”
Edwin Arlington Robinson, “Richard Cory”
Theodore Roethke, “Dolor”
Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias”
May Swenson, “Question”
in a way that fostered a "vital experience" of the
literature.

To Experiment with Process

Three painters, one canvas, two brushes. At first the
painters tentatively dabbled in their respective cor-
ers, sharing the brushes, being careful not to en-
croach on each other's territory. But soon, beckoned
by the vibrant colors, the artists showered the white
space with streaks and swirls of blues, magentas, or-
anges, and yellows. They dropped the paintbrushes
and swam with their fingers, marveling at the sen-
suous feel of paint on skin. Laughter and cheerful
chatter enveloped the trio as they slashed, dripped,
and smeared the colors. This spontaneous, chaotic
group painting was students' first taste of the paint-
ing and writing process.

I began with this three-person, two-paintbrush,
one-canvas group experience because it freed students
from their preconceived notions of what a painting
should be. Many of them had forgotten or learned to
ignore their childlike sense of wonder, play, creativ-
ity, and intuition. Painting without worrying about
the final product, a natural consequence of the group
paint in which no individual controlled the end de-
sign, helped them tap into their natural ingenuity:
"When you paint for process you listen to the magic
of the inner voices, you follow the basic human urge
to experiment with the new, the unknown, the mys-
terious, the hidden...To create is to...awaken
buried perceptions, to be alive and free without wor-
rying about the result" (Cassou and Cubley 5–6). The
freedom students tasted during the group paint tran-
ferred to their individual work. They learned to let
the paint and ink flow onto the page, to follow the
brush's and pen's lead, to liberate their imaginations
from the censors of their minds.

After the in-class group painting, students em-
barked on several individual painting and writing
adventures that consisted of spontaneous painted,
freewritten, and poetic responses to chapters from
Siddhartha, the poems I provided, and their paint-
ings and poems. Students could respond to a single
word, phrase, image, or the entire poem, painting,
chapter. They wrote or painted about what person-
ally inspired them (see fig. 2).

Students' favorite part of the paint-write
process resembled the painting and writing interac-
tions I had first experienced in Professor Angelotti's
course. Through several rounds of anonymous ex-
changes, they painted in response to each other's po-
etry, wrote poems in response to each other's pain-
tings, and shared their creations in class. Their
paintings, poems, and reflections were all completed
outside of class time (see fig. 3).

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**FIGURE 2. Instructions for Student Responses**

1. **Spontaneous Painted Responses.** Use your reading
   as a prompt for your painting. Try to let your sub-
   conscious take over as you paint, and let whatever
   emerges surprise you. Experiment with different
   colors, textures, mediums, and brushstrokes. In
   short, experiment with the process and do not worry
   about the final product.

2. **Freewrite Responses.** Write down whatever ideas
   come to mind in response to your reading. Do not
   censor your thoughts or try to control them. Just
   keep writing (even if it seems silly at the time). Do
   not worry about spelling, punctuation, or grammar.
   Simply record your ideas as they flow in a stream-
of-consciousness style. [Ideas for freewriting
   gathered from Goldberg's "First Thoughts" (8–10).]

3. **Poem Responses.** Write a poem in response to your
   reading. Whether the poem rhymes, has a specific
   meter, or follows a conventional structure is up to
   you, as is your poem's meaning, style, voice, and
   length.

4. **Student poem response to the Siddhartha chapter
   "Samsara":**
   
   Girls with painted lips—
   How difficult to escape
   The transitory!
   
   poem by Elizabeth

5. **Reflections.** After creating a painting or poem, write
   an informal reflection that explains its meaning and
   source(s) of inspiration.

6. **Portfolios.** After completing all of your written and
   painted responses, choose your best works, compile
   them into a personally designed three-ring note-
   book, and write a reflection on the entire unit.
   Your portfolio will be evaluated on completion of
   required elements, overall creativity, depth of
   insight, polished entries, and portfolio design.
FIGURE 3. Instructions for the Rounds of Collaborative Painting and Writing

Round One
The Writing and Painting

1. The students read a chapter from *Siddhartha* or a selected poem.
2. Students paint a response to their reading, leaving their paintings anonymous.
3. Students write reflections on their paintings. In a reflection, a student explains his or her painting's meaning and source(s) of inspiration.
4. I shuffle and hand out paintings to the class, making sure no student receives his or her own.
5. Students write a poem in response to the anonymous painting they received.
6. Students write a reflection that explains how they interpreted the anonymous painting and how their poem was inspired by and relates to the painting.

The In-Class Sharing (using hypothetical student names to clarify the organization)

1. Jennifer, the first volunteer, shows the anonymous painting she received, reads her poem response to the painting, and reads her reflection on the poem.
2. Mark, the creator of Jennifer's anonymous painting, claims the painting as his and reads his reflection on the painting.
3. At this point, Jennifer, Mark, their peers, and I might engage in a short, spontaneous discussion of the similarities, differences, and interesting aspects of Jennifer's and Mark's perspectives, but I try to limit these conversations to give everybody a chance to share during our fifty-five-minute class periods.
4. Mark shows the anonymous painting he received, reads his poem response to the painting, and reads his reflection on his poem.
5. John claims ownership of Mark's anonymous painting and reads his reflection on his painting. A brief class discussion might follow.
6. John shows the anonymous painting he received, reads his poem response to the painting, and reads his reflection on his poem.
7. Sarah claims John's anonymous painting as hers, and the cycle continues in this tag-team type manner until everyone has read his or her poem and heard the poetic response inspired by his or her painting.

Round Two follows the same pattern as Round One, except the students exchange anonymous poems (written in reflection on their reading) instead of paintings and paint a response to their classmate's unidentified poem.

Round Three also follows the same pattern as Round One, except the students first write a poem response to their reading and then paint a response to their own poem. Just as in Round One, they exchange their anonymous paintings and write a poem in response to one of their classmate's paintings. The end result of Round Three is that each painting is accompanied by two poems, one by the creator of and one by the receiver of the painting.

The students share their creations in Rounds Two and Three in the same tag-team fashion they used in Round One. They also write reflections on all of their paintings and poems.

The benefits of the collaborative rounds and in-class sharing were numerous. Students loved to hear or see what someone else created in response to their painting or poem. Comparable interpretations tickled them; dissimilar understandings intrigued them. Many students claimed the collaborative activities provided insights into the novel, their classmates, and their paintings and poems: "The poems that other people wrote often offered insights to the book that I hadn't thought about"; "Several students that are normally reserved really opened up during the sharing time and I could see a little more of their personality through their work"; and "Sharing the works . . . allowed for new insights and ideas that you never knew existed in your painting or poem." I gained as many insights as the students, and learning with students instead of trying to elicit predetermined answers to rigid review questions enhanced everyone's learning. As the Silerz Indians claim, "One who learns from one who is learning drinks from a running stream" (qtd. in Hubbard and Power 266).

To Illuminate the Text

The free, unstructured nature of painting and writing coupled with the students' receptive natures led to exciting findings and artistic creations. Caroline wrote the following poem in response to the *Siddhartha* chapter entitled, "Om."
The Listener
I am the listener.
I hear swirls of colorful voices.
They come together as Om.
Om is unity.
Om is color.
Om is voices.
Perhaps the skill I thought useless,
Has brought me to this stage of enlightenment.
I am the listener.
And I am complete.

As Caroline explained in her reflection, "My painting and poem are taken from the part in 'Om' when Siddhartha realizes he has become a listener because he can hear all the voices together as one." Earlier in the novel, Siddhartha determines he cannot reach enlightenment by listening to others (the Gotama Buddha in particular); instead, he decides he must experience life for himself. Caroline's poem exposed the irony of how, later in his life, Siddhartha reaches enlightenment by listening to the voices in the river. Through her poem, Caroline illuminated an aspect of the novel for herself, her peers, and her teacher.

Caroline utilized more than just her visual sense in painting a response to her poem. To depict the swirls of colorful voices in the river, she adorned her painting with bright food sprinkles. She mixed lotion called "Om" into her painting to awaken her viewers' sense of smell. By using three different mediums to convey her idea, she insightfully portrayed the unity of voices Siddhartha discovers by the river.

The person who received Caroline's anonymous painting, Sarah, wrote a poem in response, describing the tumultuous effects of a hurricane:

Eye of the Storm
The ocean is glassy and cerulean
The clouds shimmer with a rainbow light
The air calm and deceiving
Lulling one to be unaware of the
Whirling
Twirling
Raging
Howling
Merciless
Hurricane
Debris flying
Winds are sighing

Above ocean sea;
Hurling forward with destructive menace
Threatening all who choose to ignore it.
How long will you rest in the eye of the storm,
Unwary, uncaring, you have the ocean blue
While rainbow lights shimmer, death glimmers
You are in the eye of the storm; resting in comfort
Hark, I sound the warning:
The calmness shall not last
But neither will the storm
When the debris has settled you will see the ocean blue
But first you must be daring and face the storm.

The vibrancy of Caroline's painting evoked the urgent tone and vivid verbs Sarah used in her poem. In her reflection on "Eye of the Storm," Sarah commented on its meaning: "Usually we prefer to stick with our old, comfortable, easy ways. Getting out and confronting the world means courage and determination; however, once we face the storm on our own initiative we can know peace and success." Caroline's painting inspired Sarah to create an extended metaphor in which the act of facing a physical storm represents the importance of confronting rather than ignoring our challenges in life.

After Sarah shared her poem in class, I pointed out how she had created an extended metaphor. Then the class discussed figurative language and symbolism in the contexts of the literature, their paintings, and their writings. We were thrilled to discover that they were naturally using symbols, metaphors, and other figurative devices in their creations, just like the professional writers we analyzed throughout the school year. And students enjoyed analyzing the symbolic elements of the works. The writing and painting process enhanced their analytical skills and deepened their understanding of important literary terms, the literature, and the connection between visual and verbal expressions.

Sarah's creation of a poem in response to Caroline's painting is an example of the age-old practice of ekphrasis, or "writing that takes its inspiration from visual art" (Poster and Prevallet xv). When writers
respond to visual stimuli, "something new, or ‘other,’ emerges from the combination that would not have come about with a solo act" (Waldman, qtd. in Foster and Prevallet xv). Sarah interpreted Caroline’s painting about the unity of voices in a different light and created something distinct—a poem about a hurricane—and insightful in response. According to Foster and Prevallet, "Tangible and colorful, with shapes and images to grab onto, visual art inspires students to write using details that are lively because what is emphasized is the ‘I’ looking. Visual art allows students to immerse themselves in their own processes of reflection, which encourages them to generate unique responses to the world around them" (xv). As Caroline and Sarah’s collaboration demonstrated, responding to someone else’s painting presented students with an outside source of inspiration that helped them understand or recognize an emotion, vision, or memory they felt inside. This same fusion of energy, ingenuity, and insight occurred when painters responded to a verbal stimulus.

Jonathan came to understand the synergistic collaboration and resulting "new" creations on his own:

It’s a strange feeling being asked to take someone else’s poetic tapestry and weave it into your own painting. . . . During the process, you almost go from interpreting some individual’s poem, to interpreting yourself as an individual. What their cryptic artistic words meant and represented no longer mean the same thing, for now they are being seen through another set of eyes, with a different life or history and experience. It’s like it is being run through a filter of an entirely different composition. In the end the meaning may no longer be the same, and that’s the beauty of art. It’s the artist’s backdoor key to people’s inner soul. Through your work and expression you open people up to new ideas and thoughts, all surprisingly of their own subconscious.

What emerged from these painting and writing interactions was an illumination of several different texts: the novel, the poetry, the paintings, and the students themselves.

To Create a Community

I stared into my candle’s flame as the words, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,” poured out of the stereo’s speakers and into my heart. The students and I stood in a circle, our faces lit by the warm glow of candles, our spirits lifted by the special quality of the moment. I listened attentively as each student announced the positive characteristic he or she wanted to share with the world: “my sense of humor,” “my intelligence,” “my faith,” “my good listening skills.” Nobody hesitated, nobody snickered, nobody shrugged shoulders in defeat when his or her turn to speak arrived. Instead, as each person proudly declared his or her attribute, we were buoyed to higher planes of joy.

This special student-led prayer (at my Catholic high school, we start each class period with a prayer) was just one example of the ripple effect the collaborative writing and painting process had on students’ lives, my life, and our classroom community. Maggie, the student who created the prayer, was inspired by one of the collaborative sessions the class had completed weeks before. The session began with Maggie’s painted response to a quotation from the Siddhartha chapter entitled, “Amongst the People.” In her reflection on the painting, Maggie wrote,

This painting is taken from the lines “Most people, Kamala, are like a falling leaf that drifts and turns in the air, flutters and falls to the ground. But a few others are like stars which travel one defined path: no wind reaches them, they have within themselves their guide and path” (72). The spots of red, green and orange are the people who are leaves that fall to the ground in a flutter. They float around a little bit and are swayed by the wind before reaching their destination. The straight yellow spots are the stars that go on one straight path towards their destination with nothing setting (them) off course.

The student who received Maggie’s unidentified painting wrote a thoughtful poem about letting one’s inner light shine forth to brighten a dark world, and this poem helped Maggie solidify her tentative plans to lead the class in a candle-lit prayer:

[The poem response] to my painting entitled “Let Your Light Shine” made the wheels start to spin, and I finally came to a conclusion on how to put my prayer into action. I handed out white candles . . . and pieces of paper to write an attribute on and wrap around the candle. While “This Little Light of Mine” played in the background, everyone shared their attribute that they were going to let shine on the world to make it a better place.
Having the students share their paintings and writings with each other built classroom community in unpredictable ways. Indeed, the connections and community building seemed limitless, as evidenced by what happened the week after Maggie’s prayer.

Her eyes twinkling with excitement as she thrust a folded, white strip of paper in my hand, Maggie urged, “Here, read this.”

“You stand in your own light. Make it shine,” I read, glancing up at her in amazement. “Where did you find this?”

“I received it in my fortune cookie at dinner last night. I almost fell out of my chair when I read it!”

“This is unbelievable. It’s as if the universe has aligned, as if the cosmos has coalesced to create this beautiful connection.”

“I know,” Maggie added. “It gives me the chills.”

I asked Maggie to share her fortune with the class, and her reading elicited several No ways! How cools! and That’s incredible!

This special classroom experience stemmed from the involvement of every student in the class. Maggie’s painting, the poem response, and the students’ wholehearted participation in Maggie’s prayer were necessary ingredients. Maggie’s fortune-cookie message was a reminder of the underlying current that connects all life. Students’ personal experience of this unity was more meaningful and memorable than if they had just studied unity as one of the abstract themes in *Siddhartha*.

**To Cultivate Voice**

All of my students, even the ones who did not consider English their strongest subject, eventually wrote and painted a response of which they were proud. Each had a breakthrough moment when his or her “clear spring and voice” (Hesse 98) spilt forth in ink and paint. As one student poet explained, she enjoyed sharing the collaborative works in class “because it let people see a talented side of me that I didn’t even know I had. For example, one time I read a poem I wrote and after I was done, everyone looked at me with amazement. This made me feel proud and special.”

Incorporating painting gave students who believed they possessed more artistic than verbal ability a chance to demonstrate those skills and realize the connection between painting and writing. One student artist wrote: “I am very artistic, and think myself a much better artist than writer, so the mixing of painting and writing greatly improved my writing skills. . . . Now when I write, I try to write an image instead of getting caught up in words and details. This suits me well because I am not great at grammar and spelling. When I am done with a piece of writing, then I can try to correct all of my little errors, but at least I have the image of what I am saying down.” Painting and writing without boundaries and without judgments helped this student—and many others—unleash her creative voice.

An example of this emerging creativity occurred when I asked students to compose a freewrite in response to Edwin Arlington Robinson’s poem, “Richard Cory.” To my surprise, several students crafted their response into a poem, a more difficult undertaking than just responding in a stream-of-consciousness style. When I asked them why, they claimed they were inspired by Robinson’s subtly shocking poem and enjoyed the challenge of writing poetry. One student, Dylan, responded by writing a parody of “Richard Cory” that mirrored the poem’s rhythm, rhyme, and diction, yet reversed the story.

His main character was a bum, not an idol: “Whenever Charlie was around / People who walked by / would look and frown / He was a bum from beard to bottle / Dirty as a dog, and hungry.” This beginning stanza insightfully reverses Richard Cory’s situation, and at the end of Dylan’s poem, Charlie Bum realizes a happy ending: he finds a job and can afford some rent. When given the freedom to respond however he wished, Dylan seized the opportunity to examine the structure and meaning of Robinson’s poem and to reflect his understanding through a unique and delightful parody.

**To Extend the Possibilities**

While the benefits of the painting and writing process were many, the drawbacks were few. A
handful of students were skeptical at first about the appropriateness of painting in an English class, making disparaging comments such as "I thought this was English class, not art class" and "John's probably absent today because he's trying to avoid the paints." A few others viewed the paintings and personal writings as "silly" or the ubiquitous "just bs." I simply asked these students to suspend their judgment and let themselves experience the process first. Most of the cynical folk ended up writing and painting meaningful pieces of which they were proud. Even if a student never truly engaged in the process, he or she would still gain a better understanding of his or her inclinations and of the literature from having experienced it.

Another negative aspect was that sharing their paintings and writings required significant class time (time that could be spent on other important work that transpires in an English class), and responding to their portfolios required a lot of my time. But, I felt the benefits gained definitely outweighed the time expended. We discovered that painting and writing personal reflections breathed new life into our English classroom without removing substance. As the following student's final reflection on the unit revealed, the paint-write process both enhanced students' reading, writing, and thinking skills and fostered their "vital experience" of the literature:

Sometimes people tend to "empty read," or read the words but not actually take in what you are reading. When answering comprehensive questions, you can just go back to the part of the book that talked about the question and copy down the answer. But when asked to write personal reflections over what you have just read, you have to actually pay attention to the words and dig deep into your soul and mind to find an answer. . . . I have learned so much more about the book Siddhartha with our personal responses, poems, and paintings and gotten so much more out of the book than I ever could have just reading it and answering review questions.

Works Cited

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Student artwork may be found at EJ on the Web. Go to http://www.englishjournal.colostate.edu and click on “EJ Extensions.”