

## Painting as a Reading Practice

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I am particularly interested in teaching reading practices, and one practice that I have been teaching my literature students is that of painting in response to texts. I got started with this activity through first doing it myself. One of my graduate professors, Tom Lisk, has his students sketch pencil drawings in response to poems. Inspired by him, I tried it on my own but chose painting instead of drawing for the sake of texture and color. In one instance, responding to Seamus Heaney's poem "Damson" (1996), I simply covered a sheet from my sketchpad with swaths of blue paint. Since then, that poem has stuck with me in a deeper way than many other texts I have read. From time to time, its images of a man building a wall and of a simmering pot of damson jam return to my mind. I have started doing the same activity with my students, once or twice a semester, because it encourages them to look more deeply into texts and strengthens both their understanding and critical response.

This activity is not just for people who are good at painting. My sister paints pictures that people buy and frame. In fact, my spouse and I even have one of her paintings hung on the wall in our home, a collage of faces from different cultures surrounding the planet earth, half in bold colors and half in shades of grey. Lacking her gifts, all I can do is "abstract" art. I hide my paintings tucked away in a sketch pad where no one will see them. It is not that a little painting know-how would hurt. But painting ability has nothing to do with the value of painting as a reading practice, and worrying about technique or results could detract from the purpose of the activity.

In the way that I practice it and that I teach it in my classes, painting as a reading practice is a contemplative practice. I paint to see the paint make lines on paper, to feel the brush in my hand moving on paper through time, to be present to the moment, and to be present to the text I am reading. "Being good" at painting is beside the point. Reading well is the point. I aim not for short-term results, such as finished paintings worth framing, but for

the long-term growth of my students as readers. Specifically, I want to teach my students to spend time with the texts they read. This “painting to learn” activity has helped me to achieve that goal.

### **How I Do It**

Pulling off painting as an in-class activity requires some planning. I want my students to use their own painting supplies, so at the beginning of the semester I include a list of supplies on the course syllabus under a section for “Texts, Materials, and Other Costs”: “Brushes, paints, and a sketch pad suitable for painting, something other than watercolor. About \$10.” Then leading up to the day I schedule for painting, I remind them to make sure that they show up prepared to participate.

The class session before we paint, I have my students read and discuss a text that I have chosen to pair with the painting activity. I have been using the book of Joel from the Hebrew bible because as apocalyptic poetry its visual and visceral elements are integral to the meaning and experience of the text. The book (actually a poem about five pages long) has images of soldiers that look like horses, a moon that turns the color of blood, trees stripped of their bark, and so on. This bold imagery allows painting, which is a visual and visceral activity, to tap into specific elements of the genre. William Blake’s poetry, which he already painted in “response” to, would certainly be well suited for this for the same reasons. The activity would work with a wide range of other kinds of texts.

I always use a whole class period for the painting activity. At the minimum, I want the students to paint for a full thirty minutes. A fifty-minute class session works fine, but an eighty-minute class session offers more flexibility. On the day of the activity, I get to the classroom a little early to set up. I bring small paper cups and a couple gallons of water for the students to rinse their brushes. I also bring scrap paper or newspaper for them to cover their desks. I ask the students to set up their paints and take out their texts as soon as they begin to arrive.

Because I want the students to spend as much time as possible actually painting, I keep my introduction and instructions brief. I want them to understand both the procedures to follow and the purpose behind the activity, so I supplement my short lecture by giving them a written rationale for the activity several days beforehand, usually while I am reminding them to get painting supplies, and I write several “reminders” on the dry eraser board while they paint. These are the instructions:

- Choose a short passage from the text, perhaps just a few lines, to copy out onto your scrap paper. I want you to “paint from” or, at any rate, to have there in front of you the actual words of the text while you paint to help you maintain contact with the text. (Reading is the point of this whole activity, not painting.)
- You can paint anything you like in response to the text, whether that means illustrating something in it or giving an abstract artistic emotional or interpretive response. Personally, I always go with the abstract art because I really cannot paint pictures of actual stuff. (I show them some of the paintings I have done to underscore this point.)
- Remember to breathe.
- Do not talk. (This one seems almost impossible for my students! So I gently remind them of it when they start up.)
- Be aware of the physical act of painting and the physical texture of the paint and paper or canvas. Be aware of your presence in this room. Be aware of the text.
- The process of this activity is more important than the final results.

While the students paint, I set some atmosphere music playing in the background. So far, I have chosen to pair the text of Joel with Gregorian chant. I also run a slide show of images illustrating or representing aspects of the text, particularly objects mentioned in the text, in the hope of helping the students come up with an idea of what to paint in case they cannot think of something on their own. I take turns calmly walking around the room looking at individual paintings being painted and sitting off to the side to watch the class as a whole, trying to be both curious and unobtrusive.

I make sure to save time—at least nine or ten minutes even in a short class period—for the students to share their paintings with a few of their classmates and for us to reflect on the activity as a whole class, if only briefly. I gently ask the students to “come to a stopping point” (which is different than “finishing,” I make sure to point out). Then, because the paintings are all still wet at this time, I ask them just to close the caps on their paints, to carefully point their desks so that they are facing a few of the people around them, and then to take turns of a few minutes each to share and discuss.

- Read aloud to each other the passage you chose to write out and paint from.
- Show your paintings to each other and point out some things in them (not necessarily explaining them, if they cannot be explained).
- Discuss: Did this painting activity add to your understanding of the text or to the impact of the text on you? How?

After giving students time to reflect together, I call the whole class to attention to get a few summative responses from students, asking, for instance: “What do you think about this, Ashley? Was it fun? Should we do it again?” or “Louis, was this alright? Do you feel it enhanced your experience of the text?” and so on. The students usually agree that it was fun and worthwhile, even if they do not fully understand the purpose of the practice. Finally, as I dismiss them, I invite them to continue to reflect on the activity as part of their daily informal journal reflections and even to paint in response to future texts in place of a regular written journal reflection, so long as they at least add a few sentences to provide context. A number of students always take me up on this offer, continuing on their own, occasionally through the semester, to reflect on and practice painting in response to texts.

### **Why I Do It**

Taught in this way, painting as a reading practice is a contemplative practice, and so I value it partly because of the way that it taps into contemplative dynamics such as attentiveness, presence, dialogue, and community. At the most, contemplative pedagogical practices foster deep and authentic student learning, even transformation (see, for instance, Palmer 1983, O’Reilly 1998, or Kahane 2009 for discussions of transformative learning). At the least, such practices can help students develop the ability to pay careful attention by slowing them down and bringing them into contact with concrete things. Even outside a specifically contemplative paradigm, however, I value painting in response to texts simply because it contributes to students’ appreciation of literature (see Clark 2009) and because it provides occasion for rereading (see Scholes 2001: 239).

I am suggesting simply that painting in response to a text can deepen the impact that the text has on the reader/painter and can develop her or his ability to read well. In particular, I find six ways in which painting as a reading practice contributes to this deepening and developing. Of course, because students have diverse learning styles and inclinations, each of these holds true more for some students than for others.

*Painting is enjoyable for most people.* I value student enjoyment both for its own sake and because, as studies have shown and as we ought to know from our own experience, it can contribute to learning.

*Painting in class is a memorable activity.* Texts work on readers over time, whether through being read recursively or through being remembered

some time after being read. Students are likely to remember painting in class because it is an unusual activity. In turn, they also ought to remember the text in response to which they painted.

*Painting emphasizes the visual element of texts that are rich in imagery.* Since imagery is a central element in many literary texts, readers can benefit from the occasion to practice visualizing images, metaphors, and descriptions.

*Painting as a response emphasizes the role of the reader as a cocreator of literary meaning.* Readers, individually and in community, take part in making meaning with literary texts. As students are invited to respond in this specific way, they may also develop the inclination and ability to respond to texts as meaning makers more generally.

*Painting as a physical activity often calms people, slows them down, helps them to become present, and heightens their attention.* I have students get “something other than watercolor” for paint so that they will use paint that has some texture in order to highlight the physicality of painting. It is my hope that paying attention to this concrete physical dimension of the activity will lead to paying attention to the text, a vital reading skill for us to teach our students. Even if this activity does not *directly* teach students to look closely at what they read, it still leads the students to practice paying attention *with a text at hand*. This can spill over into their other reading practices.

*Because painting takes place in time, painting in response to a text causes students to linger with the text. It is a recursive and reflective reading practice.* I end with this point, the one I think is most important. Sheridan Blau (2003) argues that, more than anything else, the practice of rereading distinguished expert readers from incompetent ones. Robert Scholes (2001) suggests that the most pressing lesson for us to teach our students is that “we can *only* read and reread, to the best of our ability” (239; emphasis added). Like Scholes, what I want in teaching literature is to get my students to read and reread texts to the best of their abilities, and that is more likely to take place if they spend the time to meditate and chew on what they read, to pay close attention to their reading *more than once*. When students paint in response to the texts they read, they practice, at least for thirty minutes, precisely this kind of reading.

**Sample Paintings**



*My painting in response to "Damson."*



*Student painting in response to Joel. Used with permission.*



*Student painting in response to Joel. Used with permission.*

## Works Cited

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DOI 10.1215/15314200-1425065