

Life-giver, Death-bringer: Instructional Ideas for Exploring Water in the Middle Grades Novel *Ninth Ward*

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Abstract

Teaching children about water and symbolism through literature can be an excellent way to engage their imagination while developing their analytical skills. Jewell Parker Rhodes's award-winning middle grade novel, *Ninth Ward*, offers a rich opportunity for interdisciplinary, ecocritical inquiry within standards-based learning and teaching expectations. This article suggests youth participatory action research as an active learning strategy for engaging youth in community-based investigations of water connected to their study of water's literal and figurative significance in the novel.

Keywords

ecocriticism, middle grades, magical realism, environmental justice, youth research

Teaching children about water and symbolism through literature can be an excellent way to engage their imagination while developing their analytical skills. Jewell Parker Rhodes's award-winning middle grades novel, *Ninth Ward* (2010), offers a rich opportunity for interdisciplinary, ecocritical inquiry within standards-based learning and teaching expectations. Ecocritical inquiry of literature easily fits within the scope of

[Next Generation Science Standards](#) for middle grade students (e.g., grades 5-8), specifically [MS-ESS3-3 Earth and Human Activity](#) and [MS-Human Impacts](#). Using shared novel reading as an organizing framework builds in strategic opportunities for standards-based literacy instruction focused on [reading comprehension](#), literary analysis (e.g., focusing on author's [craft and structure](#) within the novel), and [writing production](#) from both [historical](#) and literary disciplinary lenses. In this way, *Ninth Ward* offers a unique opportunity for younger readers to engage with a magical realist text that weaves together a highly believable, yet supernatural, story of young adults living through Hurricane Katrina and the devastating floods that followed when the levees broke in New Orleans, Louisiana in 2005.

Contemporary magical realism often blends realistic and fantastic elements with the intention of disrupting hegemonic assumptions in realistic fiction on similar topics (Zamora & Faris, 2000, p. 3). For example, in *Ninth Ward*, Rhodes employs magical realism to challenge notions of objectivity and singularity in stories of environmental disasters, inviting readers to consider the multivocal and differential effects of disaster experiences. At the same time, the novel centers the perspective of a Black female protagonist whose family celebrates African diasporic cultures and histories. In addition to being a multi-layered resource for studying water's symbolism, ownership, and relation to characters and cultures within the novel, *Ninth Ward* is also a rich repository for classroom inquiry into other aspects of the natural world, including trees, sensory embodiment (i.e., characters' use of smell, sight, sound, feeling, and taste), wind, and nonhuman companions.

Ninth Ward is a magical realism novel that includes the liberatory elements of Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism to celebrate the realistic material worlds of African American girls and their families, while incorporating magical events in matter-of-fact terms. Rhodes employs the narrative mode of magical realism to connect to the genre forms of Afrofuturism (Toliver, 2019) and Afrosurrealism (Toliver, 2021). These narrative modes are used by authors to create new opportunities and (re)imagine historic and ongoing inequities often faced by members of communities in African countries, the African diaspora, and African Americans (Dery, 1994). Afrofuturism has been used by authors like Octavia Butler as a genre form to recenter and humanize neutralizing and ahistorical narratives of enslaved peoples in her novel *Kindred* (1979). Afrosurrealism

has also served as a narrative mode for the creation of emancipatory spaces (Toliver, 2021). In similar ways, *Ninth Ward* offers teachers rich opportunities for centering the stories of Black girls in their classrooms, as well as providing an engaging, accessible text for younger readers that serves as an introduction to Rhodes's oeuvre (Kershen, 2023).

In *Ninth Ward* the central narrator and protagonist, Lanesha, and her caretaker, Mama Ya-Ya have gifts of "the sight" (Rhodes, 2010, p. 2). Lanesha can see ghosts—in particular, the ghost of her mother, who died at Lanesha's birth. Mama Ya-Ya has the ability to see ghosts and foresee future events. Completely believed by characters, and believable within the story for readers, these supernatural elements help the characters to interpret and prepare for the impending hurricane. Lanesha's magical gift also serves to humanize the people who experienced the trauma of Hurricane Katrina, as she narrates the events in her Ninth Ward neighborhood. Lanesha's narration reminds readers of the multifocality of disasters and invites them to inquire into environmental justice issues (Kershen, 2024).

This article takes up the latter inquiry into environmental justice, focusing on water's literal and figurative transformative power. Within the novel, water is understood to be lifesaving, cleansing, and restorative, and those aspects are juxtaposed against water's destructive power. The extended metaphor of transformation through water runs throughout the novel, and while readers may leave the novel with a heart-warming message of survival and resilience, the emotional arc of the novel is steep, even harrowing. Importantly, attending to water through an ecocritical lens affords the reader a valuable repositioning of the concepts of natural disaster and environmental disaster. I intentionally use the framing of environmental disaster here, because as students investigate the reasons why Hurricane Katrina was so devastating for Gulf bayou communities and New Orleans in particular, they should be challenged to recognize that there was very little "natural" about the aftermath of flooding and the people who were affected. Decades of human impacts on the environment, human built design, and racist infrastructure policy resulted in levee breakage that decimated New Orleans neighborhoods and continues to harm Louisiana communities.

To begin a unit that forwards an ecocritical inquiry focused on water, students must decide together what “ecocritical” means. While not a scholarly or literary resource, collectively analyzing the [Ecocriticism Wikipedia page](#) offers a footing for students to begin asking questions to guide their shared reading. Building on the definition that “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” taking “an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii), students can combine their new definitions of ecocritical reading with an analysis of the book’s front and back covers. Considered an early advocate for ecocriticism, Glotfelty’s scholarship emphasizes the importance of studying the relationship between literature and the physical environment, exploring how texts represent and engage with ecological issues.

Investigating the book’s covers as document containing a variety of features and peritextual elements, students can proffer up predictions and inferences. Bringing these two sets of evolving knowledge together, one set that informs the inquiry as focused on how the story conveys, interacts, and describes the physical environment, and second set containing inferential knowledge gleaned from the book’s covers, readers are well-prepared to begin reading with eyes open to overarching understanding questions like, *How do we connect to water as a family or larger community? To whom does water belong? How does water serve as a metaphor in the novel?*

Initially, students can engage the literal roles water plays in the novel, charting their thinking in marginal writing, in reader-response notebook entries, on chart paper, and other forms of dialogic interaction. These ways of recording thinking become rehearsal sites of assurance and confidence for students, as they articulate their thinking into writing that can be used as discussion notes, outlines, and evidence for longer writing and class conversations. Within the novel’s plot, water is both life sustaining and life ending, as Lanesha stocks clean drinking water before the storm and later experiences the destructive power of the hurricane and rising flood waters. Water also shows up in unexpected ways, as tears characters shed and baths that cleanse and renew. Each of these literal meanings also connect to a central theme of the novel, transformation.

Supplementing a focused ecocritical exploration of water in the novel, students will likely want to investigate what caused the catastrophic flooding and why the levees broke. This investigation brings forward issues of environmental racism and justice that highlight both human impacts on the environment and the disproportionality extant in many environmental disasters. Rhodes’s novel does not address the history of racism and redlining in housing opportunities in New Orleans, nor does it explain the lack of infrastructure investment that resulted in deadly flooding throughout New Orleans neighborhoods, particularly in the majority African American neighborhoods of the Ninth Ward. However, the novel creates space for students to begin asking questions around these topics and the larger social justice issues of environmental racism and environmental justice (Kershner, 2024; Figure 1).

<i>Writing prompts for inquiry and interdisciplinary study</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has the history of water in your community shaped the geography of where you live? • How does access to ample clean water inform your decision-making day-to-day?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have storms, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and tornadoes, changed over time during a set time period in your state or region (for example, in the last five years, ten years, or one hundred years)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where is water scarce in the world? • How is “scarcity” defined in that context, and how does the need for water shape the day-to-day lives of the people and nonhuman species in that environment?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are communities effected by extreme flooding? • How do communities respond when flooded?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf coast of the United States in 2005. • How do Gulf communities continue to experience the effects of these storms? • How do the lasting effects of large storms shape human life and nonhuman flora and fauna?

Figure 1: Examples of writing prompts for inquiry and interdisciplinary study.

Ninth Ward offers a resonant opportunity for interdisciplinary studies in the middle grade classroom. Whether read as a whole class shared text, within small group literature circles, or as an independent novel read during a student choice unit, the incorporation of social studies, science, and English language arts learning outcomes and instruction cohere well. Literature can contextualize real-world examples of

scientific principles as well as scientific concepts, models, and processes that may otherwise be abstracted from student experience and real-world contexts (e.g., climate change, storm development, and infrastructure engineering). *Ninth Ward* contains multiple opportunities for students to develop lines of inquiry into many pressing environmental issues that will continue to shape our lives. Students can also engage in nonfiction writing projects resulting in the creation of feature articles, scientific reports and presentations, and interviews with local leaders and community experts in fields such as city planning, storm water, and water maintenance. These modes of community engaged research connect to models of youth participatory action research (YPAR) (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, 2017), in which students are given opportunities to conduct student-led research on issues relevant to their lives. Within this framework, teachers serve to mentor and model engaged research, supporting students as they collaborate in research they design and enact in their local communities. YPAR affords students interactions to serve as mentors to one another and to be mentored by community members with whom they might not otherwise intersect, whose expertise can open new paths of understanding academic concepts in authentic, real-time situations and contexts. YPAR also positions students as developing experts with a chance to give back to their communities. In the case of ecocritical analysis and water studies, students can share their learning with the community in school and civic club meetings, city council sessions, and in art or other performance mediums. These opportunities bridge school-based academics and social justice learning to empower students as community activists (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, 2017).

Reading *Ninth Ward* from an ecocritical literary perspective also opens students to creative and personal writing to explore the ways in which water has shaped their cultures, histories, and everyday lives. Students may choose to write from personal experience to examine the ways in which water shapes their geographies and daily priorities. As it is in *Ninth Ward*, water can also be a powerful source of memory, emotion, and recognition of self. Students can select other forms and genres of writing, including poetry, myth, character/setting studies, and short story, to explore their personal experiences with water and the ways interactions with water make them feel and have informed who they are (Figure 2).

Writing prompts for creative writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using sensory language, describe an interaction with water in your life. • How does it feel? What does it sound like? Look like? Smell like?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like in <i>Ninth Ward</i>, water is often portrayed in literature as having transformative power. • Describe a time in your life when water changed you.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write about a family tradition or celebration involving water. • How does water bring people together?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a myth or short story in which water is a character. • What role would water play in your story? • What character traits would you use to define the persona of water in your story?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a hero whose strength comes from water. What's their origin story?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe a magical creature that lives in water. • How does this creature interact with its environment?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write a diary entry from the perspective of a raindrop traveling from a cloud to the ocean.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagine you can breathe underwater. • What secrets would you discover in a local lake or river?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write about a character who gains a new skill or power related to water. • How does it change them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write a conversation between a river and a child. • What does the river teach the child?

Figure 2: Examples of writing prompts for creative writing.

Ninth Ward is a unique text for exploring the complex effects of water in our lives. Before Hurricane Katrina arrived in her New Orleans neighborhood, Lanesha interacted with water in a series of positive, yet mundane ways—she enjoyed a hot bubble bath, bathed a found puppy and played in the sprinkler with a friend, and helped Mama Ya-Ya washup dishes after a birthday dinner. These innocuous interactions reiterate the many ways we rely on water in everyday activities. At the same time, these interactions are bittersweet, as by the novel’s end Lanesha’s life has been irrevocably changed by the flooding that followed the storm. Water that was cleansing and sustaining becomes a powerful enemy. Water also serves as a transformative force in the novel, as Lanesha begins as a child and ends as an adolescent, washed anew in the flood waters. There is much for middle grades readers to explore in *Ninth Ward*, as teachers can support student-centered research into water use in local communities, combine content to craft interdisciplinary studies, and analyze the figurative and literary references to water with students.

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