Climate Literacy in Education

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Water Aways Means *Something*: A Symbolism Unit Plan

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Abstract

In this article, I present the outline of and possibilities for a high school English unit examining writers' symbolic use of water. Water typically symbolizes life, change, or cleansing. I suggest multiple possible texts in varying genres, as well as climate connections, for each of those meanings. I offer a student assessment prompt, "What water means to *me*," which students can write to at the beginning of the unit and revisit at the end. I provide a link to a Google folder with references, more resources, customizable activities, and a Spotify playlist.

Keywords

Symbolism, literature, multimodal texts, authentic connections

Students walk into my classroom and look at the piles, stacks, mounds, and accumulated detritus on my teacher desk and pause. "I'm like water," I say, reassuringly. "I spread out to cover every available surface."

And that's the cool thing about water—it not only makes for a good metaphor, it goes everywhere. It doesn't matter what you're teaching. You can teach with, about, and through water. As a high-school English teacher, the symbolism of water is a deep well to draw from (I will just say this up front: every water pun that follows is 100% intended. I could have tried to take them all out, but that kind of thinking is all wet). So, I will share, here, a unit I call "Water Always Means *Something*."

Figure 1: QR code to resources

Usually, I tell students, water represents one of three big things: life, change, and cleansing. What follows is by no means comprehensive of everything you *could* teach in such a unit, but it is also significantly more than you need to get started. The accompanying link (https://bit.ly/WaterMeans) and QR code (Figure 1) will lead you to a Google Folder of resources beyond even this overview, including links and full references for texts discussed, as well as a Spotify playlist of songs about water for analysis—or simply as a soundtrack.

Assessment

At the end of the unit, students answer the prompt "What water means *to me*." Students should know this assessment is coming from the start of the unit (backwards design and all…), and it also actually makes a great way for students to dip their toes in, to spitball ideas about water and its importance in their lives to set up the learning for the rest of the unit.

To remind students they're not the only ones swimming in this pool, you can put them in conversation with each other or a mentor text. Something like Gary Soto's poem, "Saturday at the Canal," which is full of teen angst—the speaker watches the flowing water, jealous that it can leave town while they cannot—makes for an accessible comparison. So does Alice Walker's poem, "When You See Water," which

explicitly says that water cannot be held or shaped or owned: "And so it is with you," Walker concludes.

Indeed, throughout the unit, students should be encouraged not only to analyze or criticize one text at a time, but draw connections across texts from different eras, regions, genres, and perspectives. By the end of the unit, students will have an ocean of additional perspectives and ideas to synthesize as they reexamine what water means literally, symbolically, and ecologically in their lives.

Water Means Life

Our human bodies are on average just over 60% water—we are literally just human-shaped water balloons. We can live for weeks without food, but four or five days without water is the limit. And our culture is drowning in this symbolism, from the Book of Genesis opening with "The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" to Gremlins (from the movie) reproducing when you get them wet. Alice Walker is on this path with her poem mentioned above.

I have used Daniel Wallace's novel *Big Fish* many times to anchor a water symbolism unit. Before we read, I give students the first line: "The day Edward Bloom was born, it rained." Water means life!, they shout. It's obvious! And it is. But students have just this one sentence; I ask them to write the rest of the story. Who is Edward Bloom? Why is it important to start with the fact that it rained on the day he entered the world? Who were his parents? What did he do as he grew up? This builds anticipation for what actually happens in the rest of the book, which is so erratic that the students' predictions never even come close. The great thing about Wallace's text, which does differ in some significant ways from the (also excellent and watery) Tim Burton film, is water holds all three meanings that at different times in the narrative. It just happens to start with water meaning life.

But you might be looking for shorter texts, so here are three of my favorites, in three different genres. In Leslie Marmon Silko's short story "The Man to Send Rainclouds," a Catholic priest is awkwardly inserted into an Indigenous funeral, and his holy water literally evaporates into the dry desert air. It's hard for students to miss this. Mary Oliver's "Waterfall" is as poignant as all her lovely poetry, personifying the falling

water, her inevitable succumbing to gravity, "always underfoot." E.B. White's classic essay "Once More to the Lake" is a meditation on mortality and the

Climate Connection

But this special issue is not just for gushing over texts that use water symbolically. Luckily, it is very easy to make connections between "water means life" and some contemporary ecological crises. In 2023, National Public Radio released a podcast series called *Thirst Gap: Learning to live with less on the Colorado River* that explores how human overuse of natural water sources and climate change are making life harder in the American Southwest.

Water Means Change

This symbolic meaning of water, change and adaptation and movement, feels as natural (or inevitable) as April showers. Think about any text with a river, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* being an obvious one. There's a great excerpt of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, often anthologized as "Two Ways of Seeing a River," that is significantly less problematic than *Huck Finn* and details how Twain's initial "speechless rapture" in awe of the Mississippi changed the more he learned. In the end he laments, "No, the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river." The Mississippi also appears Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and in former U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewy's "Elegy ['I think by now the river must be thick']." People sing about change and the Mississippi too Johnny Cash's "Big River," Noel Gourdin's "The River," Credence Clearwater Revival's "Proud Mary," Pete Seeger's anti-war "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," and the too-on-the-nose-titled "A Change is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke.

Beyond the Mississippi, waters of change flow everywhere. Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek" (fun connection: the legend of *La Llarona*), Doris Lessing's "Through the Tunnel," and Margaret Atwood's "The Whirlpool Rapids." The mythical river Styx beckons, and Sylvia Plath's "Crossing the Water" answers. Linda Pastan's poem "Erosion" is an ode change: "We are slowly/ undermined," it begins. "The waves move their long row/ of scythes over the long beach."

Climate Connection

Depending on where you are, there is almost certainly a local angle to climate and change. From my classroom windows I can see Lake Michigan, for example. For the Great Lakes, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) documents both the temperature and how much the height of the water deviates from historical averages—an opportunity to both talk about climate change and sprinkle in some data literacy. The internet teems with sites like Great Lakes Now and The Alliance for the Great Lakes are great sources of news, essays, and science about the Great Lakes. And local news is always talking about one thing or another related to Lake Michigan's health and safety, from invasive species to bacterial overgrowth that jeopardizes swimmers. Would we listen to "The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*"? Reply hazy, says my Magic 8 Ball.

Water Means Cleansing

There is, of course, the biblical story of the rains and the flood, just one of many examples of the mythic archetype of cleansing waters. There's every movie and TV show ever that had a character experience an epiphany in a rainstorm. Plus, there's every poet or lyricist who wished for the rain to wash away tears. Credence Clearwater Revival, again, asking "Have You Ever Seen the Rain?" and "Who'll Stop the Rain?" Rain, in general, is a giant blue arrow pointing at some kind of cleansing theme. But it isn't just rain.

I love teaching "No Name Woman," the first chapter of Maxine Hong Kinston's *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. I hate to spoil this book that dropped in 1976, but the chapter ends with the No-Name Woman of the title throwing herself and her newborn baby into the family well. She cleanses her own sin (which isn't really *her* sin) while fouling the water of the family that refused to stand up and support her.

Climate Connections

This way of looking at water flows easily into climate *change* and thus climate activism. It might be worth starting with children's books, like Carole Lindstrom's books *Autumn Peltier, Water Warrior* and *We Are Water Protectors*. As an Ohio expatriate, I might

throw in Barry Wittenstein's *The Day the River Caught Fire*, and then have students read about the formation of the EPA and the clean-up of the Cuyahoga River. (Counterpoint: Have students read about the 2024 summer Olympic Games and why swimmers did not want to compete in the River Seine.) As I write this, the *New York Times* published a story headlined "Heat Raises Fears of 'Demise' for Great Barrier Reef Within a Generation." There is no shortage of frightening news about the state of the world's water.

Wrapping It Up

At this point, it should be clear that students will have a very different answer to that prompt of "What water means to *me*" by the end of the unit compared to the beginning. Of course, we English teachers want to know if students can identify and analyze the way writers are using water in literature. But all of this I've included here—and so much more that's out there, I could barely skim the surface—should encourage students to think about water as not just important symbolically, but environmentally and personally.

Water is such an immediate, integral part of the human story that—like the piles and piles on my teacher desk—student responses should not be constrained. They should instead be allowed to spread and spill and overflow the classroom walls. Students can do more than mere formal essays or research (though students could do that if they choose). Students should be encouraged to adopt authentic means to express their new understanding and connections. For example, students could lean into climate activism and write letters, op-eds, informational booklets, or persuasive tracts. If students have a more literary bent, they could write in imitation of the unit's many poems, stories, memoirs, essays, and songs. They could present their written creations in zines, performances, anthologies of creative writing and visual art, or interconnected and linked pages of a class website.

The possibilities are, like open water, nearly endless.