

Recovery of Self and Family in Sharon Creech's *The Wanderer*:

Literature as Equipment for Living

Sharon Creech's *The Wanderer*, a Newbery Honor book from the year 2000, weaves a beautiful tale of family, adventure, and love for the sea, creating the perfect space for students to find their own connection to family, as well as essential tools for life. The highly acclaimed novel deals with the important issues of family, home, and identity and is presented as a series of journal entries by cousins Sophie and Cody that recount their adventures with uncles and cousins on a sea journey from the United States to England. Both characters negotiate family issues: Cody has the typical adolescent problems of self-image and conflict with a difficult father (the aptly named Stew); the main character Sophie (Greek for "wisdom") works to come to an understanding of family and self within the context of her tragic and mysterious family history.

By the time students read *The Wanderer*, they are probably familiar with journal writing as a route to self-discovery. This novel models that process with the alternating entries of Sophie and Cody. However, this novel also models reading (particularly of classic literature) and storytelling as ways of understanding self, family, and world. *The Wanderer* can show students that works of literature and storytelling are, in Kenneth Burke's famous phrase, "equipment for living," providing "strategies for dealing with situations" (Burke 293, 296).

No doubt every teacher of literature has heard beloved texts called "irrelevant" or "boring" by students, who often see the classics as a required school chore

that has nothing to teach them. Similarly, students often see storytelling as connected with fantasy and not as a means of problem-solving. But without being at all preachy (as literature teachers sometimes are), Creech weaves, with elements of classic texts, a novel whose resolutions are achieved by storytelling: self-understanding and self-acceptance on the part of the main character, and increased wisdom and understanding for the other characters. The novel ends with the recovery of family in all senses: as the relatives on the boat forge a strong sense of family on the voyage, as they reach their father and grandfather Bompie in England, and as Sophie recovers her memory of her traumatic past, understanding the relation between her "then family" and "now family."

Classic Themes

The novel is such a page-turner that students may not notice that they are asked to consider such serious issues as mortality, fear, identity, and family. Along with the suspense (and danger) inherent in a sea journey, the novel explores a mystery about Sophie's parentage and identity, which is not resolved until the end. As Cody's name suggests, there is much to decode in this novel, particularly since, in Cody's words, "Everyone talks in code where Sophie is concerned" (188).

Sophie begins the story by talking about her parents, though she also shares the stories of her grandfather, Bompie, who she writes is a "third parent" and

“so like me” (6). We learn from Cody, however, that Sophie is an orphan (28) and has never met Bompie (37). The cousins Cody and Brian, who deal with their own family issues on the journey, are curious about what happened to Sophie’s “real” parents and about her unwillingness to acknowledge aspects of her history. How does Sophie know Bompie’s stories when she’s never met him? For Sophie, of course, the mystery is more critical: confronting fear, loss, and death, she must recover and acknowledge her past, represented by fragments of memory and a recurring nightmare about a wave. In the process, she must deal with the connection between her past (family) and present (family).

Because the story is shaped as a journey across the sea, it can be linked with the literature of quest—*The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, to name just two—along with more modern renditions, including such adolescent works as *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* and *The Cay*. In addition to a generic affiliation with quest literature, the novel’s connection with the classics is made very specific. It takes as its title the name of an Old English poem, which serves also as the name of the boat. Furthermore, the epigraph, from “The Seafarer,” another Old English poem, initiates the theme of storytelling so important in the novel: “The tale is true, and mine. It tells/How the sea took me; swept me back/And forth.” Both poems tell of loss, memory, exile and isolation, the need for home, and the lure of the sea. Like the speaker of “The Wanderer,” Sophie has “lock[ed] up the treasury of [her] thoughts,” and the novel records her giving voice to her story in fragments, first in her journal and then to others.

The thematic resonance of these poems continues as the story proceeds. We learn that the characters nicknamed Dock, Mo, and Bompie have as their birth names Jonah, Moses, and Ulysses, all characters central to the western tradition who contend with the sea in coming to an understanding of self and world. As in the Old English poems, these quests involve the themes of exile and home, self and family, memory and loss. For Ulysses/Odysseus, the connection with *The Wanderer* is especially apt: he is a storyteller who gets home to family through storytelling as much as through heroic action.

Particularly important is Creech’s presentation of Uncle Dock, the owner of the boat and initiator of

the journey who is involved in a quest for his true love, Rosalie, as someone who uses literary works as “equipment for living.” Dock recites lines from Tennyson’s “Ulysses” and “The Lotos-Eaters,” both based on *The Odyssey* (201; 205). Sophie comments on the effect of Dock’s citations in reference to another poem, this one by Carl Sandburg: “when we had a spell of fog, Uncle Dock recited a poem about fog creeping along on little cat feet, and as soon as he said that, that’s what I saw . . . (53). Thus we learn of the capacity of literature to reflect and to transform experience. Poetry is useful; it is connected to everyday experience, helping us conceptualize and understand a variety of situations.

Most powerful perhaps is the presence of Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Uncle Dock quotes a few lines of the poem as they near land: “Oh! Dream of joy! Is this indeed/The lighthouse top I see?/Is this the hill? Is this the kirk?/Is this mine own countree?” (246–47). Additionally, allusions to the poem are woven into the story: Sophie recounts a disturbing dream “about being adrift in the ocean with no food, and we were all languishing on deck with no energy to do anything, and the boat was tossing and heaving around, and then a seagull flew overhead and landed on the boom and Brian said “Kill it! Kill it!” (57–58). For us, though not for Sophie who is unaware of the allusion, this might recall the unthinking killing of the bird in Coleridge’s poem. The *Rime* is also present near the end of the book, when the family is once again on land: Sophie describes how they are unable to stop telling their stories to strangers in a pub: “We were all chattering away like crazy, talking to anyone who would listen. . . . For hours we went on like that, pouring out the words and at one point I wondered how much these strangers cared about what we were saying, or if they cared at all, and why we felt such an urgent need to tell them our story, and why they told us theirs” (252–53). Like the Ancient Mariner to the Wedding Guest, Sophie and the others are compelled to tell their stories as an aspect of reintegration into a social context.

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At the end, the family comes to Bompie and various mysteries are solved. Through the journey, Sophie has been telling “Bompie” stories, all of which have to do with Bompie’s survival of a dangerous encounter with water, and “little kid stories,” which deal with issues of family, death, and fear of water. Sophie, of course, is the little kid: with these stories, Sophie distances aspects of her experience until she is able to claim her own story. In her journal, she also

recounts her recurrent dream about a giant wave, which she re-experiences in a terrifying scene (209). By listening to Sophie’s stories, Cody eventually solves the mystery. Sophie survived an accident at sea that killed her parents; she lived first with various relatives who died, then foster families, and was

eventually adopted by loving parents: “By this time, she wanted so much to be wanted that she made herself believe that [Bompie’s] was her real family, her only family” (270). We also learn how Sophie knows the Bompie stories: Bompie wrote her letters welcoming her to the family and “in each of the letters he told a story about himself so she would know him better” (284).

Particularly moving are the scenes between Sophie and Bompie. The voyagers discover that Bompie, like the older relatives of many students, is experiencing loss of memory and does not immediately recognize his own children. He does recognize Sophie (though he has never met her), who is experiencing memory loss of her own, even though it is through trauma and not age. In poignant scenes, Sophie tells Bompie his own stories. When, early in the book, Sophie asks her mother, “What if the picture [in Bompie’s head] got erased?” her mother replies, “How’s that going to happen?” (74). Yet it has happened, and as Sophie prefaces each story with “Remember,” she helps him recover his memories (282–83). Hence, the Bompie stories are useful in many ways—from shipboard entertainment to a way for Sophie to come to terms with her own story. Like *The Odyssey* and the Old English poems, the Bompie stories reflect the oral tradition, stories that are changed in the telling.

Sophie has transformed the stories for her own uses, selecting those stories that are about Bompie’s dangerous confrontations with water and adding to each a section on Bompie’s fear of water that was not part of the original (285). Again, this is literature as equipment for living, helping us, as Burke has it, to develop strategies for coping with difficult situations.

At the end of the novel, all return home except Dock, who remains to care for Bompie; all have undergone significant transformation, adults included, involving self-awareness, sense of vocation, and family relationships. Sophie has reclaimed the part of herself that was the “little kid”: Cody comments, “One day the little kid got lucky and she landed in a place where it was okay if she couldn’t remember all the time, and because it was okay not to remember, she started to remember. And along with the painful things came the good things to remember and maybe she felt as if she’d found some things she’s lost” (300–301). The sense of loss, exile, and painful memory that Sophie shares with the speakers of the Old English poems remains, accompanied now by a sense of home and family, much like the end of *The Odyssey* when Odysseus reclaims home and family—and thereby his own identity.

In the final chapter, “Home,” the cousins incorporate into their talk and activities elements of the stories they heard on the voyage: all the Bompie stories ended with the promise of pie, and now the children plan to bake a pie; the uncles reminisced about their childhood adventures on *The BlueBopper*, and now the cousins talk of a journey on *The BlueBopper Wanderer* (304–05). In these small details is the integration of past and present, story and real-life. At the very end, Sophie recalls a baptism witnessed earlier (103): “I’m just right here, right now. When I close my eyes, I can still smell the sea, but I feel as if I’ve been dunked in the clear cool water and I’ve come out all clean and new. Bye-bye, Bompie. Bye-bye, sea” (305).

Although the end of the novel is the usual place to end an essay, we would like to return to the beginning of the novel—to parts of a book students seldom notice: the acknowledgment and the dedication. Creech, who taught literature for many years before publishing her novels, thanks two people “for helping me decode the mystery and to arrive at the ‘end of all our exploring’ (T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”). In this line, we see the emphasis on de-coding and the

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use of literary texts to help give voice to feelings and experience. The next line of the Eliot poem—"will be to arrive where we started"—anticipates the return home at the end of the book, where we last see the characters, transformed through their journey. And Creech, who tells us on her website that two of the Bompie stories are stories told by her father, prefaces her own story with a dedication to her daughter "who journeyed across the ocean" from "the mother who worried." Thus, for the author who wrote the book and for the characters within it, storytelling, whether within the family or by "famous authors," is truly "equipment for living," providing models for coping with and understanding self and world and serving as agents of transformation.

Sharon Creech's novel is a joy to read. Its lyrical language and down-to-earth characters create a rich tapestry, beautiful threads woven together much like the cloth that Sophie's mother, and Odysseus's wife before her, weave as they wait for the return of a loved one from sea. This is a book about heritage and home, courage and companionship, adventure and artistry, but most of all, this is a book about family—about discovering the self through the other. As Sophie, Cody, Dock, and crew adventure across the sea toward Bompie, they each learn more about their own strengths as well as the strength and support of family. Bompie's stories, through Sophie's voice, give the seafarers hope and a sense of belonging, a shared past that beckons them toward the safety of home as well as the dream of the future. Like the apple pie that Bompie's mother bakes for him after each arduous adventure, Bompie himself and the security of family serve as the reward for the crew at the end of their journey. But as wonderful as this book is to read, it is perhaps even more inspiring as a magical book for the classroom. The multidimensional characters, the action-packed sea story, the descriptive details about the places and creatures, the intricate sailing terms and skills, the parallels with classic literature, the layers of storytelling—all of these threads provide a wealth of ideas for engaging students in the text and enriching the fabric of the reading experience.

Using *The Wanderer* in the Classroom

Perhaps this book's greatest strength for classroom instruction is its natural place in differentiating in-

struction. Below, we outline three specific strategies for guiding students in activities that will not only measure comprehension but also allow for creative response and choice in the learning process. In addition, all of these strategies can be easily adapted to many grade levels; while the text may be written at fifth-grade reading level, the content is so rich and its ties to classic literature are so strong that the book could easily be used with high school students, as either a bridge to classic works like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *The Odyssey* or as part of a unit on family or the sea. Our suggested strategies can also be adapted to other disciplines, since this book offers such a rich array of topics for inquiry and investigation. Above all, this is a perfect text for appealing to a variety of learning styles, since the characters themselves serve as examples of diversity in creative expression.

Jigsaw

We begin with a modified jigsaw approach that provides support for student research and development on the book's tremendous variety of topics for inquiry. Jigsaw is a method developed primarily in the social studies curriculum that allows students to cover a great deal of material without the usual heavy reading load, while it introduces the classroom family to the craft of teaching. Students work in groups, with each member of the group assigned a different topic. In this case, each student first researches his or her individual topic, then meets with students from other groups with similar topics for discussion and clarification, and finally "teaches" the material to his or her own group. This approach is ideal with Creech's novel, since each of the voyagers in the book teaches shipmates a skill on the journey—Cody teaches juggling, Uncle Mo teaches radio code, and Sophie teaches knot tying, so each family member learns to appreciate the others' skills and knowledge.

Some possible topics for research, as well as some

This is a book about heritage and home, courage and companionship, adventure and artistry, but most of all, this is a book about family—about discovering the self through the other.

Groups	Sea Life	Sailing	Map Quest	Navigation	Fishing/Skills
Group 1	Albatross	Points of sail	Martha's Vineyard	Sextant	Lobstering
Group 2	Sea flea	Sail types	Grand Manan	Gulf Stream	Clamming
Group 3	Dolphins	Bilge box	Nova Scotia	Labrador Current	Bluefish
Group 4	Whales	Knots	Ohio River	Charts	Weaving
Group 5	Plankton	Boat Terms	Ireland/England	Codes	Juggling

Figure 1. Jigsaw for Research—*The Wanderer*

plans for organizing the groups, are listed in Figure 1. In this modification of the jigsaw approach, students will be grouped so that each member of the group researches a topic from five different areas of study. After their individual research, the members will meet for discussion and clarification with a Topic Group. So, all of the Sea Life members will meet and discuss their findings while all of the Navigation members meet to discuss their research. In this way, students can compare notes and build on one another's research. The individuals will then go back to their original groups to "teach" members about their topic. The research results could then be compiled in a class portfolio so that the rest of the class may benefit from the information.

Each research category can, of course, be modified according to the skill and comprehension levels of individual students. Depending on the time and facilities available, teachers might schedule a library day or computer lab for the research; presentations could run

in PowerPoint, as simple poster board displays, or as an oral delivery of the information. Other alternatives include developing research topics before teaching the novel (to get students engaged in the book) or scheduling presentations throughout the reading.

Think-Tac-Toe

Our next strategy, Think-Tac-Toe, taps into student creativity and allows even more choice in student selection of activities. More advanced classes can even help to generate the categories and topics. The strategy is designed to engage students with the text in creative ways that allow for individual learning styles and interest. The typical Think-Tac-Toe contains at least three categories and is designed to allow flexibility in the topics. We have chosen to control this particular Think-Tac-Toe by requiring students to choose topics connected with the theme of family, but to also emphasize the categories of character, setting, and theme. Figure 2 illustrates our suggestions,

	Performance	Artistic Expression	Creative Writing
Character	Imitate Dock's knowledge of literature by reciting some of the poetry that he mentions. Be able to explain how the poem helps us to understand Dock and this story.	Imitate Mo's artistic abilities and create a sketch or painting of a key scene from the story. Choose a scene that depicts an understanding of a particular character.	Create your own code or use the radio code from Cody's log to create a message or poem written to or about one of the characters from the story.
Setting	Create a tableau of an important scene from the story. Make certain to choose a scene that reflects a clear depiction of the setting.	Create a map or model of <i>The Wanderer's</i> adventure. Choose your own media style for the piece.	Create a children's picture book representing the travels and scenery in the book.
Theme	Create a YouTube style video that explores the importance of understanding diversity in families.	Create a collage that illustrates your view of family and its importance.	Create another Bompie story or your own family story using Sophie's style of writing.

Figure 2. Think-Tac-Toe—*The Wanderer*

Role	Audience	Format	Topic
Newspaper Reporter	Newspaper readers	Feature news article	Write an article about Sophie and her adventure and discoveries about her family.
Dock	Rosalie	Letters	Write several letters pleading with Rosalie to join the family.
Brian	School newspaper readers	Raft log	Write a log like Cody's about the raft trip with the cousins on the Ohio River.
Older Sophie	Sophie's grandchildren	Narrative	Create a Bompie-style story told by a much older Sophie.
Interviewer	Public radio listeners	Interview	Write an interview with Cody after he returns home from England.
Student's Grandparent	School literary journal readers	Narrative	Write a narrative tale like Bompie's from your own grandparent's perspective.
Family Historian	Genealogy website users	Expository essay	Write an essay explaining where your family is from and how they came to America.
Travel Agency	Future travelers	Travel brochure	Create a brochure advertising a family adventure following the same route as <i>The Wanderer</i> .
Ethnographer	Journal readers	Research paper	Investigate current statistics about America's families and write a report.
Student	School class	Expository essay	Research adoption, foster families, and famous adoptees and write an overview.
Sophie, Cody, Brian	Sophie, Cody, Brian	Letters	Write a series of letters from the cousins planning their next adventure.
Literary Analyst	School literary journal readers	Analytical essay	Write a comparison of Sophie's discoveries about family and the sea in relation to one of the poems mentioned in the text.

Figure 3. RAFT Writing Prompts—*The Wanderer*

but with such a rich text, teachers and their students could certainly create much different choices. Our plan requires students to choose an activity from each horizontal row. Students are also encouraged to experiment with a variety of methods of expression for their three activities.

In addition to building more choices into the Think-Tac-Toe model, you also might experiment with varying difficulty levels and learning styles. Some other possible activities from this text might include encouraging students to explore crafts, like weaving or model boat building, or to learn to use tools, like the sextant. They might even investigate family recipes for apple pie or learn how to juggle. As always, these activities are best developed with the students, so that they have more voice in their own learning process.

RAFT

Our last strategy is perhaps the most fitting for this text, since it is called RAFT—certainly an appropriate assignment for a sea story. RAFT is another strategy that allows choice and differentiation of instruction and is usually tied to writing prompts. We have again chosen to center our activities around themes that help students explore the role of family in *The Wanderer*. In this exercise, students are allowed to choose the format, audience, and speaker for their writing assignment, but we have set control on the topic. Our suggested activities are listed in Figure 3, but teachers will surely adapt the assignments to their own students' needs.

RAFT activities could center specifically on one style of writing, if students need practice in a specific

area. For this text, a family history project might be the perfect follow-up. Students could be required to interview an older family member, but still choose their role and format for the final product. Teachers could also plan to publish a class anthology, which would create control over the audience. This is clearly a tool that is easily adaptable to specific classes, grade levels, and individual needs.

Literature as “Essential Equipment”

Students need books like *The Wanderer* to give them the equipment essential for success in life. Like Sophie, her boat family, and the Ancient Mariner before them, some tales must be passed on as necessity for both storyteller and listener. This book helps students understand the importance of hearing, telling, and saving stories like Bompie’s. But the book also helps young adults discover the power of those tales in revealing the complexities and spirit of family. Developing activities and projects like those outlined above will help students engage with Sophie’s story, but perhaps more important, these are also activities that contribute to developing a stronger “class fam-

ily” like Sophie’s “boat family.” Like the tapestry or cloth woven by Sophie’s mother, we create a space for weaving together the lives of our students—each thread important to the strength and beauty of the rich fabric of learning.

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