

Invitational History in Margarita Engle's *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*

Verse novels rooted in historical periods can help students understand the ethical behavior of characters as situated within location and time. Verse novels on challenging social issues, like child slavery, allow students to move beyond distant historical timelines and faraway geography lessons into the inner lives of the people involved in these circumstances. To illustrate this point, I explore the *invitations*, or ways in which authors use narrative to prompt the reader, and the *ethical visions*, or messages embedded in characters' conduct, using Margarita Engle's (2006) award-winning novel *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*.

Challenges of Sharing Multicultural Literature from Historical Periods

Although several educators have gotten on the multicultural literature bandwagon, fewer of them find it simple to incorporate such books into their curriculum (Kuo & Alsup, 2010). Scholars argue that readers of multicultural literature may resist the social norms that operate in texts when these conflict with their own cultural expectations (Galda & Beach, 2001). The many challenges posed by this curricular choice are exacerbated when a multicultural story takes place in another country and/or in a different historical period. Practitioners and scholars who have documented children's and young adults' responses to stories from diverse groups have expressed that what is most difficult when sharing such literature is to help students

understand people's ethical behavior and beliefs in light of the specific historical narratives (Louie, 2005; Nelson, 2005).

Ms. Nelson, a fourth-grade teacher in Indiana, addressed the difficulties of using literature to explore race relations between blacks and whites during the Antebellum period. During a discussion of *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarter* (McKissack, 1994), her predominantly Caucasian students expressed that they would have helped the slaves and probably even challenged their parents' support of slavery—actions that would not have been sanctioned in that period. Similarly, Louie observed Ms. Sandy, a high school teacher in the Pacific Northwest, as she carried out a unit on the Chinese Cultural Revolution. During an exploration of *Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom* (Feng, 1995), her class of mainly Caucasian students condemned a female character for abandoning her husband and deciding to terminate a pregnancy—two conditions that could have made her an enemy of the Chinese regime.

Despite the teachers' efforts to inform students about each historical period (i.e., United States Antebellum and the Chinese Cultural Revolution) prior to reading, the students in both classrooms continued to evaluate the characters' actions through their own norms. The accounts from these classrooms reiterate the validity of Rosenblatt's (2004) claim that "the range of potential reactions and the gamut of degrees of intensity and articulateness depend on the interplay among the character of the signs on the page (text)

[and] what the individual reader brings to it” (p. 1377). These classroom chronicles demonstrate that well-intended and carefully planned efforts at preparing readers to enter a multicultural text do not guarantee comprehension of challenging issues situated in a specific time and place.

Story Context and Reader Understanding

Stories’ Invitations and Ethical Visions

Gregory’s (2009) assertion on how stories work to persuade readers to enter their world provides a useful framework here for understanding Engle’s verse novel. Gregory explains that although all stories have an ethical vision or “a particular configuration of rights and wrongs that any story puts in motion within a represented human context” (p. 37), only certain stories manage to entice the reader to accept the invitation or, as he puts it, to assent to the story’s cueing and prompting. In Gregory’s own words, for this to happen, there must be “an agreement on the auditor’s part not to reject the data of any story out of hand and not to start out truculent or combative” (p. 72). Allowing for such a dialogic stance can lead to “successful reading . . . in which the person who reads appropriates the characters in the text as voices of the self, at times displacing some aspect of his or her own consciousness” (Lysaker & Miller, in press). This is not to say that literature can lead to blind imitation.

Instead, Gregory (2009) posits that stories, including those in print, can provide readers with alternative ethical models on which to base their ethical decisions. After all, young adults are regularly bombarded by direct and indirect ethical influences from parents, caretakers, and their peer group; these influences already inform their ideas of available ethical models. But the formation of the self does not have to be constrained to the realm of the real and immediate, Gregory claims that stories, and I would add young adult literature, can serve as yet another source of ethical models for students. As Lysaker, Tonge, Gauson, and Miller (2011) explain, “the activity of reading involves the introduction of new voices—those of the text—in the conversation that is the ‘self.’ . . . which like other conversations, have the potential to transform” (p. 527). The transformational power of stories is further emphasized by Gregory (2009) who suggests:

The fact that stories *do* work—the fact that they cue our capacities for feeling, believing, and judging—inevitably raises questions about their potential influence on character, for what *is* character other than the particular configuration of our own ways of feeling, believing, and judging? (p. 23)

The historical fiction verse novel is a perfect example of a type of story that invites readers to consider complex historical circumstances.

The Rise of the Verse Novel

The past decade has witnessed the rising popularity of verse novels in the field of young adult literature. Some scholars (Groenke & Scherff, 2010) claim it is the verse novel’s postmodern qualities, such as its inclusion of various narrators, that is partly responsible for this phenomenon. Others attribute its attractiveness to the traditional first-person account and its focus on the characters’ feelings or emotions (Campbell, 2004). The visual layout of the verse novel, with its predominantly white space, has been deemed accountable for enticing reluctant readers (Sullivan, 2003) and creating a peculiar literary effect of pause and reflection in the reader (Shahan, 2009).

This brief overview of the verse novel’s popularity in the last decade provides a glimpse at the many reasons young adult readers assent to reading it. Margarita Engle’s (2006) *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano* is a brilliant example of the power of the historical fiction verse novel. The invitations in her text bring readers to a deep understanding of the novel’s ethical models through the slave/slave-owner dynamic and consequently its larger ethical vision: the conditions of slavery and the consequences of resistance. Other verse novels by Engle that also achieve this invitational effect are included in Figure 1.

Additional Historical Fiction Verse Novels by Margarita Engle

Hurricane Dancers: The First Caribbean Pirate Shipwreck. (2011). New York, NY: Henry Holt.

The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba’s Struggle for Freedom. (2008). New York, NY: Square Fish.

Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba. (2009). New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.

Figure 1.

Teaching *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*

Story Summary

Engle's book opens with a poem by a 6-year-old slave. Juan, just like his mother María del Pilar Manzano and his father Toribio de Castro, was born into slavery and works for Doña

Beatriz, an affluent slave owner. Doña Beatriz grows fond of Juan and grants freedom to his parents under one condition: Juan will belong to her until she dies. Years later, upon her death, Juan chooses to go live with his godmother, La Marquesa de Prado Ameno, instead of his family.

It is here where Juan's real torment will take place until his escape a decade later. The plot of the novel is narrated from the perspective of seven different people—one of Engle's many invitations to the reader.

Invitational Narrative Perspectives in Engle's Verses

First Owner

Juan's first owner, Doña Beatriz, marvels at the training she is able to offer her boy-slave. She calls him her pet, her own personal entertainer—a well-mannered boy that she can take to parties and theater performances. As a result of this unique dynamic, Juan is often delighted by the small things offered by his owner: the scents of the open courtyard, the architecture of the house, and closeness to his parents. More important, he enjoys being able to learn language during his contact with books and affluent people. Doña Beatriz's fondness for Juan is evident in how she makes him a preferred companion. It is also manifested in her use of the endearing term Juanito, or little Juan. But Juan's father is able to see beyond his son's childish naiveté and his growing fame. For him, the child whom people call the Golden Beak is nothing but a caged bird.

As this plethora of voices demonstrates, Juan's relationship to his first owner is seen quite differently by each actor; thus, the reader is invited to explore them all to reach a conjecture of his/her own. The

owner says she treats her boy-slave as her own child, Juan exclaims he enjoys the attention given to him if this means he gets to learn words, while for Toribio, the boy is merely being used by his owner and her acquaintances. Unfortunately, Juan's relatively easy life comes to an end five years later with his owner's death, when he chooses to go to his godmother's house.

Second Owner

Unlike his first owner, La Marquesa is not highly concerned with public functions, pleasing the nobles, or buying her way into heaven by granting freedom to a few slaves. La Marquesa's own son—Don Nicolás—describes her as someone “with a mind / that needs light” (Engle, 2006, p. 61). Toribio adds that she is vile, crazy, and cruel. Not surprisingly, Juan's adolescence becomes endless pandemonium under this new ownership. Soon enough, daily misery erases all traces of stature and grace from Juan's past, and brings forth the dire conditions of slavery. The boy once considered a genius is now being shunned and starved; he is transformed from “poodle” (Engle, 2006, p. 5) to “stray dog” (Engle, 2006, p. 45). His mother worries about rumors of insanity regarding Juan, La Marquesa, or both. Like María del Pilar and Don Nicolás, the reader feels powerless as Juan's degradation continues its steady pace. Much like Toribio, we hope that the gossip surrounding La Marquesa's nature is exaggerated speculation, but we soon find this is not the case. Juan is shackled, whipped, endangered by ferocious dogs, beaten, and the victim of many other punishments crafted by La Marquesa.

These first-person narratives achieve their purpose; the reader is horrified at Juan's suffering and humiliation. We experience Juan's torment as he wonders if he is really hearing voices from the dead corpses locked with him in the cellar, and we feel his anger as he paints the figure of a witch with his brushes. Amidst Juan's dehumanizing state, we rejoice when what remains of this poet produces a verse or a song.

Invitational Gaps in Engle's Verses

The appeal of Engle's invitations through the use of multiple voices and first-person accounts is heightened by the careful use of narrative gaps. These silences or questions entice the reader to return continu-

ously to its pages to see how this biographical piece turns out. Such intriguing puzzles include: the unique form of attachment that Doña Beatriz has to Juan, the ambiguity of Juan's choice not to join his parents, and the strength of the human spirit under horrific bodily and spiritual punishment.

The prolonged emotive fragments coupled with unforeseen changes in narration demand constant thought from the reader. First, the reader ponders what Juan's feelings are toward his owner. Does he really think she is his surrogate mother, or as he calls her "his sweet ghost-Mama" (Engle, 2006, p. 9)? Is this loyalty fueled by her kind treatment? Is it a result of his childish inexperience? Is it just a game? Second, the reader is dumbfounded to learn that Juan will not go to his parents after the death of Doña Beatriz. Like Toribio, we speculate if Juan has become spoiled as a result of living inside his owner's house and being taken to palaces. The reader's hopes for an answer intensify as we learn that years pass, punishment escalates, and Juan's real family skirmishes with illness and death. Why doesn't he just go to them? we find ourselves exclaiming. Is this the one beating or whipping that ends his life? His suffering? All of these gaps, these invitations to co-create meaning from the various verse fragments crafted by Engle, hook the reader to the text; we yearn to understand the many whys evoked by the characters' actions.

Conditions of Slavery as Ethical Visions in Engle's Verses

The multi-voiced nature of Engle's poetry allows readers access to a well-grounded historical understanding of the conditions of slavery, even for child slaves. The reader learns through Juan's daily suffering that the slightest hint of resistance can be daring. It was precisely the verses he wrote on leaves, the psalms he memorized, and his desire to nurture his artistic and philosophical hunger that triggered most punishments by La Marquesa. As she explains, "I'm not a fool, I can tell when a rhyme is meant / to mock me" (Engle, 2006, p. 80). Any form of empathy toward a slave, any move against the established order, would be extinguished. Juan's mother would soon learn this lesson. She would be punished, even as a freed slave, for confronting the man whose whip penetrated her son's flesh. Only subservient behavior would lead to an extended life because, as Juan states, "long

sharp blades [what slaves use to work the fields], [are] so useless / against guns" (Engle, 2006, p. 140). In Engle's novel, those who adhered to the slavery system quickly thwarted these forms of resistance; for the contemporary reader, these instances can provide a realistic view of the conditions of slavery.

Engle makes it quite clear that every actor in the slavery system had a particular role (i.e., owner, overseer, slave), one that was not without consequences to the human psyche. For instance, the overseer is the person in charge of delivering the owner's ruling; he is the one who administers the whips. As he tells us, "This is life, there are people with whips / and people with scars / from the lashes. / Which would you choose?" (Engle, 2006, p. 79). Engle later portrays him praying that his dreams are not tormented by Juan's blood. Likewise, the owners also suffer from this system. Doña Beatriz needs to deny her ancestry, her colored roots. Thus, she whitens her skin with a concoction before making public appearances; as Juan explains, "we no longer look the same dark owner and dark slaves" (Engle, 2006, p. 6). She also brings Juan along to public appearances, partly to exert her status and her difference from the darker boy. In the meantime, La Marquesa seems to yearn for Juan's reciprocity, his gratitude, but she is unable to identify the right way to earn it.

As the behavior of the overseer and the slave-owners suggests, no one was exempt from the conditions set by slavery. Through the ethical models provided in the voices and actions of each character in Engle's verse, readers can grasp the range of ethical choices available to people who lived in this particular historical period—one that they can only experience vicariously.

Universal Themes as Ethical Visions in Engle's Verses

Engle's realistic presentation of the slavery system in Cuba, along with its reverberations in the fiber of human consciousness, provide a springboard for students to understand how the system prevailed for

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centuries and why it was not easy to eradicate. Her accurate portrayal of this challenging issue confirms Gregory's (2009) argument that stories "organize the data of chaotic experience, to refer beyond the data itself to larger meanings in the universe, and to *connect* that data to our own lives" (p. 14). In this manner, the

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novel provides educators with universal manifestations of slavery that can be used to address the conditions of slavery in their own country's history. A powerful message weaved into Engle's ethical vision is the notion that slaves were not always passive victims of this system. Instead, slaves found less obvious ways to resist and

improve themselves, especially by encouraging the human spirit through verse and song.

In a system that preserved knowledge and skill for the slave-owner, and everyone's actions were constantly being watched, slaves identified subtle strategies for using letters, symbols, and words to instill courage. As Seely (2004) explains, "historical fiction [and I would add the historical fiction verse novel] has the opportunity to examine a historical past imaginatively, at the level of an individual life, the actions that lead to change, that make history" (p. 23). The life of the poet Juan Francisco Manzano, which is the basis of Engle's novel, is a premier example of the virtues that slavery could not undo.

Future Directions

The ethical and invitational nature of this verse novel is evident, but its reverberations for educators and students deserve further exploration. After all, a considerable number of young adult novels published today include multiple voices, contradictory stances, and nontraditional narrative patterns (Koss, 2009). Future studies could document students' responses to this text and the accompanying illustrations by Sean Qualls, aspects that were not considered here. In addition, educators could explore the appropriateness of various reading strategies, such as how to take the perspective provided by a single character

or actor (e.g., slave) or how to draw connections between characters in the absence of dialogue. In the meantime, the historical notes, original poetry by Juan Francisco Manzano, and references included at the end of *The Poet Slave of Cuba* could serve as a well-grounded initial context for the educator who wishes to use this particular title.

I hope this exploration of the historical fiction verse novel as a preferred genre for achieving a deep understanding of ethical behavior as it is framed by the particularities of time and location encourages educators to share such texts in their classrooms. As I have tried to demonstrate, the verse novel as a genre, with its fragmented use of multiple voices and its thought-provoking first-person accounts, pushes readers to draw connections between voices and provides them with a multi-tiered presentation of characters' motives. It is precisely these qualities that continue to invite readers to delve into poetic historical journeys.

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Harvey Daniels—2012 CEL Exemplary Leader Award Recipient

Harvey “Smokey” Daniels is an extraordinary teacher leader whose writing, presentations, and professional development work define a model for teaching and leadership development based on research, best practice, common sense, trust, and respect. An author, editor, and consultant, he is a professor of Education at National Louis University in Chicago, Illinois (currently on leave). Smokey served as Co-director of the Illinois Writing Project for 26 years. A prolific writer, he has authored or coauthored 17 books, beginning with *Best Practice: Bringing Standards to Life in America’s Classrooms*, now in its fourth edition. In addition to books, he has contributed numerous articles and essays in professional journals. A common thread runs through his writings: literacy is accessible to all, and it should offer joy to all.

In 1989, Smokey founded a summer residential retreat, the Walloon Institute. During Walloon’s two decades, thousands of teachers from across the country were renewed and inspired, helping them to create classrooms that are experiential and active through increased levels of choice and responsibility, which in turn leads to higher student achievement. Smokey’s commitment to exceptional teaching led him to spearhead the creation of Best Practice High School in Chicago in 1966. In addition, his belief in the leadership capacity of committed teachers launched the Center for City Schools, a dozen interrelated projects that supported teachers and parents in restructuring schools around Chicago and the Midwest. In his numerous workshops and presentations, Smokey connects theory and practice in a way that embodies the kind of learning we envision for our students and ourselves. Smokey Daniels has initiated work that is visionary, and his impact on the profession is of lasting significance.