

# **Allegory and America: Analyzing the Work of Virginia Lee Burton**

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## **Overview**

This unit will be taught in my 11<sup>th</sup> grade English 3 course. The goals of this unit are to teach students about symbolism and allegory in fictional texts, and to address issues in American History in the 1930s and 40s. My English 3 course is taught in parallel to an American History course, so we try to move along in a synchronized and often mutually-reinforcing curricular trajectory. I also try to focus my teaching primarily on novels, so that students can build reading stamina while also developing their comprehension skills and literary device recognition and interpretation.

In the second semester of the year students will read two 20<sup>th</sup> century American novels – *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Great Gatsby*. Both novels are works rich in symbolism and imagery. They also address issues of race, class, and culture in America from Reconstruction through the 1920s. In reading these novels we will address some other issues in American culture during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they are not our primary focus. This leaves gaps in my students' literary and historical understanding of this time period. While the facts of history during this time will be covered in depth in the students' American History course, I will look thematically at issues of urbanization and modernization.

Beyond the social issues and historical context for the unit, our studies will have a specific focus on analytical strategies. The discrete skills of this unit fall under one of my students' areas of highest need – interpreting symbolism and allegory in fictional texts. Before my students can be successful as interpreters they first must develop skills in identifying symbols and possible allegories. Once they are confident in recognizing these

literary elements they can then apply their skills to interpreting their use and analyzing the author's intent in the piece. The unit will use rudimentary texts – primarily the picture books of Virginia Lee Burton– and then transfer those skills to higher level texts.

## **Rationale**

11th grade is a key testing year in Pennsylvania and both the Pennsylvania State Assessments (PSSAs) and college entrance exams test my students' ability to recognize and interpret literature according to very specific categories of literary expression. Therefore our approach to teaching literary interpretation is often blurred with our test preparation work. It has been a challenge to both “teach to the test” and teach the novels and works of literature around which I have shaped my course of study. This juggling act is a larger part of the unit and lesson-planning I do as an 11th grade educator.

From practice tests, class work and other evidence of student learning, I have identified allegory and symbolism as areas where my students need a lot of support. My students have had limited success with recognizing these more interpretative elements in literary analysis. Through instructional interventions they have grown more able to recognize examples of figurative language, but these representative aspects of literature have persisted as a challenge for them.

In high schools (and middle schools) across America, the books *Animal Farm* and *Of Mice and Men* are often used to teach allegory and symbolism. In fact, a quick internet search for general lesson plans on teaching allegory leads to a dead end with these texts (with the occasional *Lord of the Flies* or Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, thrown in for good measure). Even my “go to” lesson plan resources – [www.webenglisteacher.com](http://www.webenglisteacher.com) and the National Council of Teachers of English site, [www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org) do not offer any more general teaching suggestions for this tricky literary element.

I mention these texts and the lack of resources to drive at the trouble with teaching allegory in my English 3 class. As 11<sup>th</sup> graders in the School District of Philadelphia, my students should have already encountered both the Orwell and Steinbeck examples of allegory and yet still when we start off with allegory during my review unit on Literary Terms my students draw a blank. I do not mean to imply this is the fault of their previous educators, but rather that this topic of allegory specifically, and symbolism more generally is such a problem area for my students. I can think of many reasons why this may be the case. Most plainly, it is that understanding representative meaning in text is a higher level of processing literature than my students have been typically asked to do. What is more, in order for my students to identify and analyze symbols and engage in allegorical interpretation, their basic comprehension of the plot, character and exposition must be solid. Before they can interpret symbols and allegorical resonance, they have to be able to recognize when an object or a character is acting as more than just an agent of

the narrative. This requires a firmer grasp on reading for understanding than my students often have.

In the service of “reading comprehension,” we tend to spend a painstaking amount of class time just parsing the “who, what where, when and how” of the stories we read. In the name of understanding character motivation or authorial intent, we also spend some amount of time teasing out the “whys.” My students also approach text and demonstrate understanding by making predictions and trying to anticipate how characters may behave based on key pieces of exposition. Finally, we spend a great deal of time working with texts by making personal connections. We do not spend nearly enough time reading into texts or dwelling in possibilities and interpretations. When we attempt to analyze along symbolic or allegorical lines, I find that issues of comprehension and also lack of experience with common symbols get in the way. These end up being the most didactic and leading discussions we have in class. I feel my students rely on me as the teacher to have the “right” answer when we engage in this kind of interpretative work. I also know that for the most part when they encounter symbolic or allegorical interpretation in standardized tests they flounder. They choose answers that do not have any textual basis and they cannot justify to me why they have arrived at their conclusions. All of this experience of struggling with allegory and symbolism lead me to believe they need to be intentionally taught in my class next year.

It is therefore essential to build skill in this area in a deliberate and methodical way. In my classroom, I rely heavily on the Constructivist model<sup>1</sup> for teaching and learning. I believe that students bring relevant prior knowledge with them to class, that prior knowledge must be harnessed in direct ways to ensure strong connections to material. I also see it as my role as an educator to model effective learning practices – especially in terms of analyzing text. Finally, constructivism as an educational theory asserts that new skills must be “scaffolded” or gradually built in a series of activities or lessons that use prior knowledge and recently acquired skills as a basis for developing related or more complex skills. As students gain confidence and mastery with new skills the educator models less and removes some of the “scaffolds” or supports, allowing students to construct their new understanding or develop their new skills. Systems in my classroom supported by these theories are my Do Nows and Anticipatory activities that attempt to access prior knowledge in framing a lesson or unit. I also use modeling and scaffolding in most of my lessons, attempting to layer new skills and strategies so students build from what they know.

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<sup>1</sup> I have learned and absorbed this theory from a variety of sources and the explanation that follows is my own. Some resources to support my interpretation of Constructivist education theory will be included in my Annotated Bibliography.

In this unit I will be more explicit about my scaffolding and modeling, particularly when it comes to my use of picture books. I anticipate that there will be push-back from students when I bring books that seem to be for small children into my 11<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom. I am prepared to justify the use of “low-level” material as a safe and easy way to experiment with interpretative reasoning. I owe my students, their parents, and my administration this justification. It is my intention to use Virginia Lee Burton’s works as a sandbox for experimenting and developing interpretative skills. Then at the end of this short unit, we will move on to more complex texts where we can apply the analytical skills I intend for my students to master.

## **Background**

Why Virginia Lee Burton? It is not enough to say that her books are classics – although they are widely accepted as such – exemplary and influential as part of the early wave of American picture books for children in the late 1930s. It is also not enough that Burton’s books are often cited by authors I admire (like Sandra Cisneros) as foundational in their own experiences as readers and writers. Finally, in highlighting the allegorical richness of the books I have found a thematic way to squeeze them in as a chapter of American History that I want to explore more deeply in my course. Somewhere in the timeliness, the mass appeal, and the sheer elegant simplicity of her picture books, Virginia Lee Burton’s stories stand out to me as ripe for interpretation. There is something indelible, accessible, and yet multifaceted about Burton’s books and this “beneath the surface” complexity is what situates them squarely in this unit on allegory and ideas of America.

The five books around which I am framing our “sandbox” studies were published between 1937 and 1952. Read together this little oeuvre has a powerful thematic unity. *Choo Choo*, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, *The Little House*, *Katy and The Big Snow*, and *Maybelle*, *The Cable Car* all set forth an argument about modernity and urbanization. The stories share a mentality that has been interpreted as somewhere between conservative and conservationist. Some have called Burton’s *The Little House* an “anti-urban romance” (Kornbluh) or a “first sociology book for children.” Others have read implicit warnings into the books messages about the simplicity of small towns, the dangers of the city, or the power of community energy. Burton’s perspectives (I hesitate to call them her politics) are characterized in an elegiac documentary about her life and work as “Rachel Carson for children.” After immersing myself in information about Burton’s life, I could engage in my fair share of heavy-handed allegorical readings of the stories along Marxist and Feminist lines.

It happens that there is good (but not varied) biographical material on Virginia Lee Burton. She was the subject of a lovely biography by Barbara Elleman and the well-regarded documentary film, “Virginia Lee Burton: A Sense of Place.” In order to establish a frame of reference for our analysis, we will use excerpts from the film and biography in class. This actually serves two purposes – it lays the groundwork for basing

interpretations on actual facts about Burton's life and interests. It also works into the course some biographical text, which – like allegory – is material that is explicitly covered in the state standardized tests. We will encounter this material in the “Author Study” portion of our unit.

For the educator who does not have the time to peruse this material now, there are some important aspects of Burton's life and work that should be mentioned here. First and foremost it is important to see Burton as an artist, as well as a writer. She was a dancer and an illustrator early in her career and went to art school to study both. She landed firmly in the visual arts almost by accident. She was going to join her sister's dance troupe in New York, but instead ended up needing to take care of her father. The shift from dance to drawing introduced her to George Demetrios, a well-respected sculptor and art teacher and Burton's future husband. She started her career drawing for a newspaper, the Boston Transcript – sketching the dancers and other performers for the paper's performing arts reviews.

Burton's early sketch-work naturally influenced her children's book illustration, particularly with regard to movement and momentum. One of the features of her children's books is their commitment to moving – her heroes and heroines themselves are often objects of motion and commotion – trains, steam shovels, snow plows, cable cars. Not only are these objects active they are also things that boys (her immediate audience, as the mother of two sons) like! This audience-specific nature of her writing is actually an aspect of her craft that Burton consciously honed. According to an anecdote in the documentary, Burton's her first picture book, written in 1935, was rejected by 13 publishers. She read it to her son and he fell asleep! This taught her that she needed to better understand her audience and she learned to “honor the mind of the child.” According to her sons, Burton shared all of her material with them after that first failed attempt and she revised her work based on their responses. They explained that her final test for her material was to read the same story to the same people for month straight without them falling asleep. This child-centric road-testing certainly paid off. Burton's books have sold over 7 million copies and are certainly cherished fixtures on many family shelves.

But Burton is not only regarded for her books, she was also the founding member of a women's art collective. In 1938 (right in between her first and second books) Burton founded the Cape Ann textile group, the Folly Cove Designers. The group began when Burton offered design lessons with a neighbor in exchange for violin lessons for her son. Utilitarian from its origin, the design collective gave women in her small Massachusetts coastal community a way to express themselves artistically and create “pretty things” for their homes that they could not otherwise afford. This expanded into a productive enterprise that lasted for three decades (until just after Burton's death in the 1960s). The women carved their designs in linoleum blocks and used them to print on fabric – creating patterns for clothing, wall paper and other household items. Their work was

exhibited in museums in the 40s and 50s and sold in department stores (Laidler). The design work from this group is recognized as a form of American Folk Art and is considered a late chapter in the Arts and Crafts movement (Nathan).

I find this aspect of Burton's life and art particularly interesting and believe there is a lot to be learned here that might influence interpretation of her children's books. For one, the collective approach to art-making recalls for me the communal impulse of books like *Mike Mulligan and Maybelle*, *the Cable Car*, in which communities rally together as problem-solvers and supporters. There is also a significant, if nascent, feminism in the women's artist collective. One of the Folly Cove designers, Lee Steele, mentions this in the documentary, saying "We didn't discuss women's liberation. We just went ahead and did it" (Steele in "Virginia Lee Burton: A Sense of Place"). I have no intention of reading too much into this community or its intentions. Still, it seems worth noting that for all of her talk of boys' preferred subject matter (trains and trucks and things) and writing for boys as her audience, Burton has female main characters in almost all of her books (Mary Anne, the steam shovel; Maybelle, the cable car; Katy, the plow; Calico, the wonder horse; and even *The Little House*, herself). I would hope some of my more adventurous students could take up this trope in their own interpretations and develop arguments for reading Burton as feminist or otherwise!

## **Objectives**

The literacy goals of this unit are discrete. Students will learn to recognize symbols and instances of allegory. They will be able to interpret representations in text. They will be able to test these skills in texts where basic comprehension is not a barrier to higher-level analysis. Then they will apply these skills with confidence to more complex texts.

Students will know they have succeeded in the objectives of this unit when they can approach new texts at their grade level or above and analyze and interpret any symbols or allegorical elements of the text. They will need to be able to cite specific examples from the text to support their interpretations. This will require them to use quotes and paraphrasing effectively in their writing. They will build these writing skills alongside the reading skills that are at the heart of the unit.

In terms of history and social history, students will learn about modernization and urbanization in the 1930s through the 1950s. I will support this aspect of the unit by bringing in statistics and some excerpts from history books to explain some of the national demographic and regional shifts occurring during this time. Students will build some basic knowledge of dynamics of the time period. Then students will use Burton's books to explore and interrogate some varied opinions about this time of national change. We will discuss and debate issues of urbanization, technology, and other ideas of American identity as they connect to this time period. Students will be encouraged to

challenge Burton's apparent "conservative" or "nostalgic" position and, if they choose, defend the urban setting against her criticisms.

## **Strategies**

*Text Rendering:* This is a broad category of activity referring to a number of strategies wielded by English teachers to help students make meanings of text. Some times this refers to specific activities like "Think-Pair-Share" and "The Whip." Some education agencies and experts use the term to refer to actually marking up a text – using symbols like question marks, exclamation points, and stars to create an active reading experience for students. More often though the term refers to activities characterized by participatory and active in-class exercises – this is what I mean when I include it here as a strategy for the unit.

In some cases like with the National School Reform Foundation Protocols, the term "Text Rendering" only applies to the activity others call "the Whip" or "Whip-around." In this simple but easily-adapted activity, students select words or phrases from a text and say them quickly one-at-a-time whipping around the room. Students can also say a word or phrase that they choose as a response to the text, instead of selecting their lines from the text. Some versions of the activity repeat the "Whip" with first a sentence, then a phrase, then a single word. Again these can be selections from the text or student-generated. The activity can be used in a number of ways, depending on how the teacher chooses to frame it. I have use the activity to create a "sound poem" or to move towards specific conclusions about a text – highlighting powerful diction, effective imagery or resonating themes from the students' word and phrases.

It is certain that we will use either "the Whip" or a related text-rendering strategy to generate quick responses to the texts in this unit. I find these activities serve my goals of engaging all learners in order to establish a community atmosphere for discussion.

*Author Study:* In order to engage my students in the analytical work of this unit we will need to establish basic knowledge of Virginia Lee Burton and her life. Expanding beyond basic biographical data we will use the strategy and logic of an Author Study. The goal of an Author Study is to give the students context about the texts we study. It situates a writer and her words into a broader community of readers and writers, as well as a specific historical or cultural context. The approach is common for elementary classrooms and is often part of introductory work with text at a secondary level. My goal would be to do more than just share facts about Burton; we would build broader and deeper understanding of her as an artist and writer. The students will need this knowledge of her to interpret (and justify their interpretations) of her work's layered meanings. To do this we will watch and read some first-hand accounts (interviews with her sons, letters from her archive) and look at primary source materials (her sketches, newspaper work, and prints).

*Inquiry-Based Investigation:* In establishing a protocol for our analysis of Burton's texts, I will equip my students with protocols or guidelines for interpreting symbolic or allegorical meaning in texts. I will also rely on some of the Inquiry Protocols developed by the National School Reform Foundation. My approach will engage students in using questions – questions that they ask of texts, of authors, and of themselves as a reader – to make meaningful conclusions about the stories they encounter. I will probably provide these questions (and include some samples in my Appendix for this unit) at the beginning of our work with the children's stories. I will also have the students see that writing these questions is part of learning how to do the actual analytical thinking itself. I will structure some activities around my own questions and some activities around student-generated questions. I will model the questioning as something active readers do. All of our work with this inquiry approach to text is intended to encourage students to ask these questions even without me or an assignment there to prompt them. The goal of building analytical and critical thinking skill is achieved when students can internalize these questions for themselves.

*Taking it to the Text:* This is what I am calling the strategy of taking my students' skill set mastered in the lower-level text and applying those skills to the higher level material. In keeping with children's metaphors, the move from the "sandbox" to a more complex playing field is also like the act of removing a bike's training wheels. In starting with lower level texts I removed the hurdle of comprehension – so students could experiment with interpretative readings without feeling frustrated by complexity of vocabulary or narrative structures. The real test of their skill mastery is when they "Take it to the Text" and have to prove that they can analyze symbolic and allegorical meaning with more challenging texts. I was thinking about making this less intimidating at first by having my students apply their knowledge of allegory to a text we will have read together already – Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

We read *The Crucible* at the start of the year and while in the past two years I have tried to broach the idea of the play as an allegory for McCarthyism this lesson usually falls flat. I have had learners read Arthur Miller's writings on the matter, excerpts or the entirety of the *New Yorker* piece "Why I Wrote *The Crucible*." The problem we run into is that I have to teach the entire history of the Cold War, McCarthyism and the Red Scare for my students to be able to make any sense of the article. Since even the word Communism holds little meaning to them, it is really a daunting undertaking. Since we read the play at the beginning of the year as a part of our unit on actual Puritan writings (poems and sermons), it is really disjointed and has not been something I have felt successful teaching. I am thinking that if we wait until the spring when we study allegory and students have a growing knowledge of American history leading up to the Cold War, we may be in a better position to tackle the Miller essay. This may be the perfect way to "Take it to the Text" in the form of some in-class writing and discussion around the ways in which *The Crucible* (a higher-level text with which they are already



familiar) is an allegory. Then we could also attempt to analyze other allegorical or symbolic aspects of texts either in practice PSSA passages, or other short writings.

## **Classroom Activities**

### Classroom Activity #1: Read-Aloud

Description: This lesson plan actually covers three or four days of lessons, although some of the planning and practicing could take place at home. Over the course of a few days, students will read children's books out loud and practice asking questions about the book as they read. They will work in partners so that they have an audience for the reading and questions. They will also record their final "presentation" of reading the book and asking their questions. This recorded performance and their one-page reflection are the final products they will submit at the end of this activity.

Learning Goals: Students will read children's books looking for symbols and possible allegorical meanings. Students will review Bloom's taxonomy and understand the different levels of knowledge according to this theory. Students will use their knowledge of Bloom's theory to develop effective inquiry-guiding questions at different levels of understanding. Students will work well with a partner. Students will read out loud and present their questions to a partner. Students will answer questions about the children's book. Students will record their read-aloud session. Students will reflect on their learning.

### Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Reflect on their own experiences of children's books and reading aloud.
- Read and understand children's books.
- Read aloud with fluency.
- Work effectively with a partner.
- Identify symbols and elements of allegory.
- Distinguish between levels of learning: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation.
- Write effective questions for each level of learning.
- Revise their questions with a partner.
- Record read aloud and questions sessions.
- Reflect on their learning through writing.

### Learning Plan (3-4 Day Lesson):

Day 1

#### *Opening Activity:*

For the Do Now students will respond in writing to the following questions: What is one children's book you remember from your childhood? This can be a book you read in

school or at home. What is one thing (a character, setting or object) you remember from the book? What is one idea you remember from the book?

Students will volunteer to share their Do Now responses with the class. While we discuss the Do Now, the educator will direct the conversation to possible symbols and morals in the stories we as a class remember from childhood.

*Modeling:* The educator will model reading a children's book out loud and asking guiding questions. Students will identify symbols as a class – brainstorming a long list. After some process-oriented discussion, the educator will then introduce the project. Students will choose their picture books (from a hat) and be assigned partners.

*Brainstorming:* Independently or with their partners, students will read their picture books and generate as many questions as they can about the book and possible symbols and meanings in it.

*Closing Activity:* Students will rank their questions in order of “difficulty” before submitting them to the educator as an “Exit Ticket.”

## Day 2

### *Opening Activity:*

Students will respond in writing to the Do Now Prompt: What makes some questions harder than others? Are questions only different in terms of difficulty? What kinds of questions get the most interesting answers?

### *Direct Instruction:*

The educator will introduce Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning and the different types of Questions you can ask for each level of learning. (See Appendix B).

### *Independent Practice:*

Students will be instructed to review their questions from yesterday and categorize them according to the Handout. Students will write new questions (at least one per level of learning).

*In Partners:* Students will practice reading their books out loud to their partner and asking and answering their questions for inquiry. Students will revise questions to get to better answers and better understanding of symbols and meanings in the book.

*Closing Activity:* Students will respond in writing to the Exit Question Prompt: What do you need to do tonight to be ready to record your Children's Book Read Aloud tomorrow?

*Homework:* Practice and prepare for Children's Book Read Aloud.

Days 3 & 4

*In Class:* Students will work on recording their Children's Book Read Alouds with their partners. If time remains they can present their videos to the class.

*Homework:* Students will write a one-page reflection essay about what they learned from this assignment. Students will need to consider the following questions: What did reading aloud teach you about reading and children's books? What did you learn about questions and levels of understanding? How did planning ahead and working with a partner help you in this project?

### Classroom Activity #2: Biography & Text

Description: In this three-day lesson students will form an interpretative argument about one of Burton's picture books based on the biographical and historical information we reviewed in class. At stations, students will read passages of background reading and answer PSSA-Style Reading Comprehension Questions. At home, students will brainstorm, plan and write a short position paper presenting their argument. These papers will be shared with the class. Each paper must include a strong thesis statement, supported by evidence from both Burton's text and life.

Learning Goals: Students will read and understand biographical information about Virginia Lee Burton. Students will review material about the historical period in which Burton was writing (the 1930s, 40s and 50s). Students will read children's books by Burton (*Choo Choo*, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, *The Little House*, *Katy and The Big Snow*, and *Maybelle*, *The Cable Car*). Students will write position papers putting forth their personal interpretation of one of Burton's books using evidence from text and biographical or historical sources. Students will present their position papers to the authentic audience of their peers.

### Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Read and understand nonfiction texts.
- Respond to PSSA-style questions about nonfiction passages.
- Explore and interrogate some varied opinions about the time period.
- Read children's books for allegorical or symbolic meaning.
- Interpret representations in text.
- Analyze authorial intent.
- Develop strong thesis statements.
- Write position papers with well-structured and well-supported arguments.
- Cite specific examples from the text to support interpretations.
- Use quotes and paraphrasing effectively in writing.
- Present position papers to their classmates.
- Participate in class discussion.

- Revise writing based on peer feedback.

Learning Plan (3 Day Lesson):

Day 1

*Opening Activity:* Students will respond in writing to the Do Now Prompt: Consider the quote from Burton's Caldecott speech, "It seems to me that books for children are amongst the most powerful influences in shaping their lives and tastes. In this sense, the books are an important means to a better world, for the future lies, to some extent, in the hands of the children of today; for tomorrow their lives and their tastes will be the ones that count" (from Burton's Caldecott acceptance speech in 1943). What kinds of things can children's books influence?

The educator will discuss the idea that Burton's books were intended to influence children. The educator will outline the activities in this lesson: 1) Reading about Burton & her Time Period.

2) Reading one of Burton's books. 3) Writing Position Papers.

*Stations:* Students will read some selected passages of background text about Virginia Lee Burton, The Great Depression, American Cities, the 1930s, the 1940s, the 1950s. At each station they will read a passage and answer 2 PSSA-Style Reading Comprehension Questions. When students complete the stations they will be able to select a Burton book and begin preparing their position papers.

*Closing Activity:* Students will respond in writing to the Exit Question Prompts: 1) What book of Burton's are you going to write about tomorrow?

*Homework:* Re-read the picture book. Start brainstorming ideas for your interpretation.

Day 2

*Opening Activity:* Students will respond in writing to the Do Now Prompt: What is one thing you learned yesterday about the time period or Burton that you are going to use in your position paper? What is one example in the book you can focus on as evidence for your interpretation?

*Direct Instruction:* The educator will review guidelines for writing strong thesis statements. All students will write a draft of the thesis statement for their Position Paper. The class will test out a few thesis statements to see if they meet the criteria.

*Independent Practice:* Students will write their position papers in class. Students who finish early will present early!

*Homework:* Complete a draft of the Position Paper to be presented and discussed tomorrow in class.

### Day 3

*Opening Activity:* Students will respond in writing to the Do Now Prompt: What is the strongest sentence in your Position Paper? How does it help you make your argument?

*Student Presentations:* All students will read their Position Papers to the class. Students are encouraged to ask questions of their peers to force them to strengthen their arguments.

*Class Discussion:* As a group, the class will discuss some of the different interpretations of Burton's books put forth by their peers. The class will attempt to come to some conclusions about Burton's message for children/the future!

*Homework:* Revise the Position Paper as needed after today's presentation. Final version is due the next day.

### Works Cited

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Burton, Virginia Lee. *The Little House*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942.

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## Annotated Bibliography

### Resources for Educators

Anderson, Lorin W., Lauren A. Sosniak, and Benjamin Samuel Bloom. *Bloom's Taxonomy: A Forty-year Retrospective*. Chicago: NSSE, 1994.

I consulted this text while planning and rationalizing my pedagogical approach to this unit. Bloom's work is often used in education theory to break down skills that need to be mastered for building understanding and critical thinking. As students move from remembering to creating (or knowledge to evaluation), the types of instruction and assessment an educator uses would change. The retrospective text explores and evaluates various applications of Bloom's theories. A useful reference for many educators, for the work of this unit and general use in practice.

Bloomfield, Morton W. "Allegory as Interpretation." *New Literary History* 3.2 (1972): 301-317.

This article offers a theoretical perspective on allegory and approaches to interpreting allegories historically and ahistorically. As a whole I think the article overcomplicates things and may have limited utility for educators and students. It is also very concerned with the broader academic politics of interpretation. It may be worth consulting for an educator looking to explain the basics of allegorical interpreting to students. An excerpt from the article could be a good practice text for test preparation purposes. Students would find it highly academic and dull, like many of the passages on standardized tests.

"Folly Cove Designers | Sarah Elizabeth Shop." *Welcome to Sarah-Elizabeth-Shop.com / Sarah Elizabeth Shop*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Mar. 2011. <[http://www.sarah-elizabeth-shop.com/background/folly\\_cove\\_designers](http://www.sarah-elizabeth-shop.com/background/folly_cove_designers)>.

This is actually the website of a shop in Rockport, MA that was owned and operated by one of the Folly Cove Designers. Sarah Elizabeth Holloran was born in Gloucester and studying design with Virginia Lee Burton, joining the Collective in 1942. After the group disbanded in 1969, she continued her design work. She retired in 2002 and passed away in 2009. The shop is maintained by Isabelle Natti, also a Gloucester native with a printing legacy in her family. The website has a great deal of historical and biographical information about Folly Cove and some great images of designs by Holloran and Natti, which are for sale.

Goddard, Joe. "Virginia Lee Burton's Little House in Popular Consciousness: Fuelling Postwar Environmentalism and Antiurbanism?" *Journal of Urban History* 37. (July 2011): 562-582.

This very recent article discusses Burton's personal history and books (specifically *The Little House*). Goddard's interpretation of Burton's conservationist and anti-urban impulses are very much in keeping with my own ideas about her work. The article is excellent reading for educators interested in Burton and includes great details like images from *The Little House* since many of Burton's drawings speak more sentimentally than the text of her story. Goddard also quotes from Burton's Caldecott Speech, which I could not locate a copy of myself. I use the quotes from him in the Lesson Plans for Classroom Activity #2.

Laidler, John. "Celebrating Cape Ann's Art Pioneers." *The Boston Globe* [Boston, MA]. International Herald Tribune, 8 July 2001. *HighBeam Research*. 21 Mar. 2011 <<http://www.highbeam.com>>.

This article was published to coincide with a stage play about the Folly Cove Designers. The tribute performance of art, theater, and dance was produced in 2001. The article details background information about the Folly Cove Design Collective and its legacy in the Cape Ann community.

McKee, Jo Beth. "Before-During-After Reading Strategies: Text Rendering." *Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening*. Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d. Web. 4 June 2011. <[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/before-during-after\\_reading\\_strategies/7540/text\\_rendering/508393](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/before-during-after_reading_strategies/7540/text_rendering/508393)>

This is the Pennsylvania Department of Education's resource on Text Rendering as a "During" Reading strategy. This webpage offers an overview of the strategy and some suggestions for how to implement it in the classroom.

Nathan, Jean. "LIVES: An American Original." *Vogue*. [New York, NY], (2008): 156.

This article in *Vogue* offers a brief biography of Virginia Lee Burton. It introduces her as the author of "iconic" children's books, but is more interested in presenting Burton's role in the Folly Cove Design Collective. I would use this article directly with students as a brief biographical text for reading in class. It is an authentic nonfiction source and would be good for PSSA practice as well as our Author Study.

National School Reform Foundation. "NSRF Materials." Harmony Education Center. n.d. Web. 4 June 2011 <<http://www.nsrffharmony.org/protocols.html>>.

The protocols and guides available at the National School Reform Foundation (NSRF)'s website are invaluable to me in my practice. They have numerous tools and approaches to collaboration, problem-solving, and discussion for adoption in and out of the classroom. They have warm-ups, discussion and facilitation guides, and

team-building protocols as well. Many of the tools are structured for use among colleagues in professional learning communities or Critical Friends Groups. Some are just as useful inside the classroom; I use the Text Rendering and Inquiry protocols in this unit. You can even print and distribute NSRF's guidelines to your students directly, or modify them for activity instructions.

Perkins, D.N. "What Constructivism Demands of the Learner." *Educational Technology* September (1991): 19-21.

This article gives a scholar's perspective on how Constructivism affects learners and learning in a classroom setting. It is a brief exploration of how the approach can actually be overwhelming or daunting for learners. The article encourages teachers to recognize three demands of constructivism "cognitive complexity," "task management" and "buy in." I include this article in this unit because it is important for educators to consider potentially unforeseen challenges in adopting this particular pedagogical approach.

"Reading Rockets: Author study toolkit." *Reading Rockets: Reading Comprehension & Language Arts Teaching Strategies for Kids*. WETA, n.d. Web. 4 June 2011.  
<<http://www.readingrockets.org/books/authorstudy/>>

The Reading Rockets website offers numerous reading and comprehension tools for struggling readers, the project is funded by the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education. The Author Study Toolkit gives a thorough overview of the Author Study strategy I included in this unit. It includes reasons for using the strategy, checklists for implementing it, and other resources for bringing Author Study to your classroom.

Samuelson, Robert J. "Goodbye Mike Mulligan." *Newsweek* 19 Dec. 1994: 51.

This is a cute little essay about one man's relationship to *Mike Mulligan*. The author expands on his own personal reflections and dwells on the themes of the book and of Burton's "The Little House." He makes a few broad generalizations about American society in relation to the books. The essay may be a good sample of non-fiction writing for class use.

Sharp, Peggy A. "Picture Books in the Adult Literacy Curriculum." *Journal of Reading* 35.3 (1991): 216-219.

In this article the author offers an argument for using picture books in adult education. The logic is that "past experiences are the foundation for current learning." The goal is to use picture books to connect to adult learners, who either encountered the books as children themselves or in relationship to their own children



and grandchildren. By encouraging the practice of read aloud and using familiar and comfortable material Adult Literacy teachers can use picture books as discussion starters or as ways of testing out reading strategies (as I do in this unit).

Sipe, Lawrence R. "Storytime: Young Children's Literary Understanding in the Classroom." New York: Teachers College Press. 2007.

This book by Professor Larry Sipe is an invaluable text for all literacy teachers. Sipe uses extensive research into actual classroom practices to explore how children develop fundamental literacy skills through picture book reading. He emphasizes the learning that takes place in the conversations teachers have with their students during read aloud or storytime. This would be a great resource to share with students in introducing the Read Aloud assignment in this unit.

"Virginia Lee Burton: A Sense of Place." *Virginia Lee Burton: A Sense of Place*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.virginialeeburtonthefilm.com/>>.

This is the website supporting the documentary film that I am including as a Student Resource for this unit. The site includes detailed background information about Virginia Lee Burton and the Folly Cove Designers. It also has more information about the film.

Windschitl, Mark. "Framing Constructivism in Practice as the Negotiation of Dilemmas: An Analysis of the Conceptual, Pedagogical, Cultural, and Political Challenges Facing Teachers." *Review of Educational Research* 72.2 (2002): 131-175.

This is an extensive article on Constructivism in contemporary education. It is especially focused on the struggle of adjusting to and implementing a truly constructivist approach in their classrooms. The author is concerned with exploring the different kinds of challenges teachers face when attempting to adapt or alter their practice in accordance with this or any education theory. It is a very interesting read, but has less direct application to this unit. Encouraged for those interested in really wrapping their heads around Constructivism and progressive pedagogy.

Rosen, Judith. "Children's Books: Virginia Lee Burton Turns 100." *Publishers Weekly*, 6 Apr. 2009. Web. 4 June 2011. <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/9993-children-s-books-virginia-lee-burton-turns-100-.html>>.

This is one of many retrospective articles on Burton from around 2009. The year marked both Burton's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday and the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Mike Mulligan's* publication. There was also a flurry of media coverage in 1999 when *Mike Mulligan*

turned 60 and Burton's longtime publisher coordinated a "Mike Mulligan Day" event with Boston's "Big Dig" including a billboard of Mike and Mary Anne at the sight of the Big Dig! I found countless articles on Burton and her books from these years, I could not figure out how to incorporate them into this unit at present, but I am sure that another educator may find them useful (and easy to find!)

#### Resources for Students:

Burton, Virginia Lee. *Calico the Wonder Horse, or the Saga of Stewy Stinker*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941.

This is Burton's Western in picture book form. It was not one of the books I plan to use in my classroom because it less directly involves the themes of urbanization, industrialization and progress. Still it is a pretty neat little book! Inspired by her sons' obsession with comic strips, Burton experimented with frames and adventure stories, in this stylized book. The hero of the story is the horse (a female!) not her cowboy companion. The Western is itself a trope ripe for interpretation, particularly when situated in Depression Era politics. So there are still ample opportunities for "reading in" to this picture book if an educator chooses to include in his or her classroom!

Burton, Virginia Lee. *Choo Choo*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937.

*Choo Choo* Burton's first published picture book! It is about a locomotive engine that shirks her duties pulling the train and runs away. In true children's book fashion she "learns her lesson" about responsibility and attention-seeking behavior and is recovered after running off her tracks. There may not be as many political interpretations possible, but the moralizing tone in the story may offer points of interpretation for students.

Burton, Virginia Lee. *Katy and the Big Snow*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943.

This is a classic Burton. Katy is a crawler tractor who works on the roads for the Highway Department. In the winter they put a snow plow on her and she saves the city of Geopolis! She clears the roads for all kinds of municipal functions – postmaster, water department, fire department, etc. The books opening pages have encyclopedic illustrations (and very few words) of trucks, construction sites, and municipal buildings. I think students will have a lot to say about the kind of details Burton chose to include in this book!

Burton, Virginia Lee. *Life Story*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962.

This final picture book of Burton's is nothing like the others. It is a complete natural history of the world. It is the story of the earth and the evolution of life on earth told in "scenes" over five acts and a prologue. It teaches about the planetary science, earth science, and more general phenomena like the seasons. It is fascinating and beautiful and I have no idea how to make sense of it in the context of her other works or this unit. It's a wild card!

Burton, Virginia Lee. *Maybelle, The Cable Car*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952.

*Maybelle* is one of Burton's latest books and it seems to have one of the strongest messages about progress and community. The story is about a battle to save a San Francisco Cable Car who is going to be replaced by more modern buses. A community is formed to save Maybelle and the democratic process goes into full swing. Burton clearly wants to teach civic action and details the process of petitioning city hall, to campaigning for a ballot initiative and includes the Election Day vote as the story's climax. There is a great deal of material for interpretation here!

Burton, Virginia Lee. *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939.

Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne are probably Burton's most famous characters. Mike Mulligan and his steam shovel Mary Anne are excellent diggers, but are being rendered obsolete by new technology. They leave the city for a small town where they might be able to make themselves useful. They build the foundation of the new Town Hall in a single day, but they foolishly trap themselves in the hole. Everyone comes to watch the dig, but no one has any idea how to rescue Mike and Mary Anne. Then Dickie B. (an actual child in Burton's life) comes up with the idea that Mary Anne should be converted into a furnace and Mike can become the Town Hall's janitor and all is well. It is a book about hard work and loyalty and listening to the ingenuity of children. There are a number of ways this book could be interpreted by students.

Burton, Virginia Lee. *The Little House*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942.

This is the book that started the unit for me. It is the story of a house in the country that gets swallowed up as a city grows around it. The lithe house hates the city and is eventually rescued by the great-great-granddaughter of her first inhabitants. The house is moved back out to the country and is happy once again. The story is a remarkable study in Burton's ideas about conservation and modernization. The anti-urban sentiment or the desire for "a simple life" are just the starting places for students' analysis and interpretation.

Elleman, Barbara. *Virginia Lee Burton: A Life in Art*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002.

This is the comprehensive biography of Virginia Lee Burton. Elleman discusses her life, her art, her books, with a definite emphasis on her work and not her life. The book itself is beautiful, full of visual material from Burton's life: family photos, sketches, prints, images from the picture books. The biography is a good starting place for educators undertaking an author study on Burton and can be excerpted to provide the necessary background readings for students in this unit.

*Virginia Lee Burton: Sense of Place*. Dirs. Rawn Fulton and Christine Lundberg. Docurama, 2007. DVD.

This is the remarkable documentary about Burton and her work. The film includes interviews with children's book experts, Folly Cove Designers, Burton's sons and other figures throughout her life. It gave me a terrific sense of her life and her artistic career. There are definitely scenes I would use in class. Again, this would be a great resource for the Author Study.

## **APPENDIX A – Pennsylvania Academic Standards**

1.1.11. B. Analyze the structure of informational materials explaining how authors used these to achieve their purposes

1.1.11.D. Identify, describe, evaluate and synthesize the essential ideas in text. Assess those reading strategies that were most effective in learning from a variety of texts.

1.1.11.G. G. Demonstrate after reading understanding and interpretation of both fiction and nonfiction text, including public documents.

1.1.11.H. Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading.

1.2.11. B. Use and understand a variety of media and evaluate the quality of material produced.

1.3.11.B: Analyze the relationships, uses and effectiveness of literary elements used by one or more authors in similar genres including characterization, setting, plot, theme, point of view, tone and style

1.3.11.F: Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama.

1.4.11.B: Write complex informational pieces (e.g., research papers, analyses, evaluations, essays).

1.4.11. C. Write persuasive pieces.

1.5.11.B. Write using well-developed content appropriate for the topic

1.5.11.D: Write with a command of the stylistic aspects of composition.

1.5.11.E: Revise writing to improve style, word choice, sentence variety and subtlety of meaning after rethinking how questions of purpose, audience and genre have been addressed.

1.5.11.F: Edit writing using the conventions of language.

- 1.5.11.G. Present and/or defend written work for publication when appropriate
- 1.6.11.A: Listen to others.
- 1.6.11.B. Listen to selections of literature (fiction and/or nonfiction).
- 1.6.11.D: Contribute to discussions.
- 1.6.11.E: Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.
- 1.8.11.C. Organize, summarize and present the main ideas from research.

## **APPENDIX B – Classroom Handout (for Classroom Activity #1 Read Aloud)**

I would give this handout to students to help them write their own questions for our read-aloud inquiry activity. They would use these sentence starters to write out the questions they'll ask their partner/audience during their read-aloud. I would introduce Bloom's Taxonomy as a way of structuring our lesson on inquiry!

I adapted it from the "Blooming Questions" Inquiry protocol developed by the National Education Reform Foundation.

([http://www.nsrharmony.org/protocol/doc/blooming\\_questions.pdf](http://www.nsrharmony.org/protocol/doc/blooming_questions.pdf))

### **Using Bloom to Develop Questions for Children's Book Inquiry**

#### **Knowledge**

According to "Bloom's Taxonomy" this level of learning includes:

- remembering
- memorizing
- recognizing
- recalling identification
- recalling information

Sentence Starters for writing your own questions:

- Who \_\_\_\_\_?
- What \_\_\_\_\_?
- Where \_\_\_\_\_?
- When \_\_\_\_\_?
- Describe \_\_\_\_\_.

#### **Comprehension**

According to "Bloom's Taxonomy" this level of learning includes:

- interpreting
- translating from one form to another
- describing in one's own words
- organization and selection of facts and ideas

Sentence Starters for writing your own questions:

- Tell me how \_\_\_\_\_.
- Explain why \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Application**

According to “Bloom’s Taxonomy” this level of learning includes:

- problem solving
- applying information to produce some result
- use of facts, rules and principles

Sentence Starters for writing your own questions:

- How is \_\_\_\_\_ an example of \_\_\_\_\_?
- How is \_\_\_\_\_ related to \_\_\_\_\_?
- Why is \_\_\_\_\_ significant?

### **Analysis**

According to “Bloom’s Taxonomy” this level of learning includes:

- subdividing something to show how it is put together
- finding the underlying structure of something
- identifying motives
- separation of a whole into component parts

Sentence Starters for writing your own questions:

- What are the parts or features of \_\_\_\_\_?
- Classify \_\_\_\_\_ according to \_\_\_\_\_.
- How does \_\_\_\_\_ compare/contrast with \_\_\_\_\_?
- What evidence can you list for \_\_\_\_\_?

### **Synthesis**

According to “Bloom’s Taxonomy” this level of learning includes:

- creating a unique, original product (verbal or physical)
- combination of ideas to form a new whole

Sentence Starters for writing your own questions:

- What would you predict/infer from \_\_\_\_\_?
- What ideas can you add to \_\_\_\_\_?
- How would you create/design a new \_\_\_\_\_?
- What might happen if you combined \_\_\_\_\_?
- What solutions would you suggest for \_\_\_\_\_?

### **Evaluation**

According to “Bloom’s Taxonomy” this level of learning includes:

- making value decisions about issues

- resolving controversies or differences of opinion
- development of opinions, judgments or decisions

Sentence Starters for writing your own questions:

- Do you agree/disagree with \_\_\_\_\_?
- What do you think about \_\_\_\_\_?
- What is the most important \_\_\_\_\_?
- Place the following in order of priority: \_\_\_\_\_.
- What would you do if \_\_\_\_\_?
- How would you decide to \_\_\_\_\_?
- What criteria would you use to assess \_\_\_\_\_?