

My philosophy of education is founded in Idealism, and I take seriously my moral responsibility to help students learn to the best of their individual abilities so that they may collectively move society toward the greater good. But, I was rather to the lectern born. My great-grandmother moved to Athens, Alabama, from Virginia in the 1880s to teach mathematics at Athens Female College. Her daughter followed in her footsteps and taught Latin on the campus in the 1930s. Then, after a decade of teaching high school English, I continued the family tradition and began teaching at Athens State University in 1996, and—*poof*—nearly twenty-five years have passed. But the same principles that called me to the profession make it difficult to lay down my chalk and retire, though the white streak in my hair suggests otherwise. But I still *love* teaching. While now considered pedagogically old school, this “school marm” still lectures, but I don’t just tell them what’s in the text, I tell them what the years have taught me beyond the text. I have spent my entire adult life reading the collected works of favorite authors, researching the criticism, studying their biographies, traveling to their old stomping grounds, touring their homes, essentially walking miles in their shoes. I loved learning in Oak Park, Illinois, for example, that Ernest Hemingway’s mother dressed him as a girl and tried to pass him off as Earnestine, a twin of his sister Marcelline. To the armchair psychiatrist, this became the missing piece to the puzzle of Hemingway’s hyper-masculinity—both in himself and in his characters--the boozing, the big game hunting, the bullfighting, the billfishing. The Hemingway code, “grace under pressure,” was his own, and it masked a very real need to overcompensate that haunted the rest of his life until he put an end to his pain with a shotgun in 1961. Or may I tell you about Flannery O’Connor, lupus invalid, as wickedly humorous as devout, who at the age of six taught a chicken to walk backward, and she said, “It was the high point in my life. Everything since has been anticlimax.” But surely naming a character “Hulga” must have felt like a grand achievement, and creating Hulga’s nemesis in the pointedly phallic “Manley Pointer,” who leaves Hulga literally without a leg to stand on when he steals her prosthesis, must have been a belly laugh. Or did you know that when Scottie Fitzgerald was finally allowed by St. Mary’s Catholic Church to have her father F. Scott’s body exhumed and moved to the churchyard, though they had refused his interment there at the time of his death due to his being a lapsed Catholic, that what they discovered, glimpsed through his glass topped coffin, was his almost saint-like lack of putrefaction? Of course, we all know he was no Saint Scott; rather, he pickled himself with gin while still above ground. You get the big picture here. I enjoy sharing the authors, like old friends, the humor and the pathos, with my students, then together we analyze their works in a dialectic approach. Through questioning, I encourage students to discuss, analyze, synthesize, and apply what they have read to what’s in the contemporary news. And they write. I give them the privilege to write under pressure in longhand essay exams in Blue Books, just as I had the opportunity to do so at Vanderbilt. And, of course, there are research papers with current, peer-reviewed, scholarly sources obtained through the library’s databases. But a favorite story with which I like to end classes is Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use.” In this story two sisters vie for family quilts, one who has “made it,” Dee, now self-styled “Wangero” to get back to her African heritage; and one who lacks self-esteem, Maggie, “chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle.” Wangero wants the quilts for their aesthetic/financial value, and Maggie wants them for their personal/sentimental worth. Wangero, declaring them “priceless!” had likely seen the one hanging in the Smithsonian behind glass with a plaque that reads, “By an anonymous slave in Alabama.” Maggie wants them because in each piece of cloth she sees her grandfather’s shirts and grandmother’s Sunday best, and they remind her that she learned the art of quilting from the women she loved. Exasperated, Wangero says to their

mother, “Maggie can’t appreciate these quilts! She’d probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use.” At this moment, the narrator—and Walker--gives the quilts to Maggie. Alice Walker’s point is precisely that—that art *should* be put to everyday use. And my point is the same: when we leave the classroom, what we have learned should not be shelved and forgotten. No! Art should be put to *everyday use*. We should carry the lessons we have learned through the vicarious experiences we have encountered in our minds and in our hearts. As President Barack Obama said, there is magic in “the power of words as a way to figure out who you are and what you think, and what you believe, and what’s important, and to sort through and interpret this swirl of events that is happening around you every minute.” We have known people of different faiths and different finances through reading literature. We have learned that it is not what is between your legs, but what is between your ears that matters. We have seen that a little more or less melanin makes no difference, that differences in externals are not differences in internals. We have looked through Freudian, Marxist, Post-Colonial, Feminist, Queer, and New Historicist lenses, and what comes into focus is that literature is beautiful. It is beautiful, and it is complex. And our students are complex. Being already juniors and seniors, and often older than typical undergraduates, they are more mature and, given this chance, eager to learn. Many commute, most work, pay their own tuition, or take out student loans for the price of attending. Most are married, and many have children. Priorities within their piecemeal produce patches of a different color. So our students are motivated. They do not take their education for granted. Many are first generation college students. So I want them to love school generally and literature specifically. I want to nurture their love of English, to make my enthusiasm contagious. And finally, as two-thirds of my students are studying to become teachers themselves, I take seriously the charge that I may, like a ripple effect, touch the minds and hearts of literally generations of students. Reading fiction should be a lesson in empathy. So the message I teach is one of love in this secular priesthood, and I want my students to put it to *everyday use*.

--Bebe Gish Shaw, Ph.D.
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