

Text as Object and Art: Aesthetic Impact on Audience Reception of Books in the Early Renaissance and Today

Subject: World Literature

Grade Level: 10

Rationale or Purpose: Students will examine the role aesthetics play in the publication and proliferation of text, beginning with the world's first metal-print book. They will apply the concept of physical affectation on reader experience to literature and readers today, and they will analyze the changing trend of physical beautification of text. They will examine the varied types of information a page can communicate – information via words is just the beginning. Students will understand that, like visual arts, information is also communicated via font, structure, ink, drawings, etc.

Materials:

- Catholic Encyclopedia, definition of “aesthetics” (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01174c.htm>)
- Gutenberg On-line Exhibition (<http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent>)
- University of VA's e-King James Bible (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/kjv.browse.html>)
- Gutenberg Education Module (<http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/education/modules/gutenberg/books>)
- Paper for note-and-question-taking and written response

Lesson Duration: one 50-minute class period

Objectives: English II - 110.43

- (1A-C) organize ideas in writing in a voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose (2A) use prewriting strategies to generate ideas
- (3A-C) rely increasingly on the conventions and mechanics of written English
- (4A) use writing to formulate questions, refine concepts, and clarify ideas
- (4D) represent information in a variety of ways
- (7B) draw upon personal background when interpreting text
- (8A-D) read a variety of texts for different purposes in varied sources
- (9A) recognize distinctive and shared characteristics of cultures through reading
- (10A-B) respond to aesthetic elements in text
- (13A) generate relevant, interesting, and researchable questions
- (14A-B) listen for a variety of purposes
- (15A-C) speak and orally analyze for a variety of purposes
- (18A) make valid interpretations of a text
- (19A-C) understand and interpret visual representations
- (20B) deconstruct media to get the main idea of the message's content

Activity:

Step 1: For homework the previous night, students read and outline the Catholic Encyclopedia's definition of "aesthetics". To begin class, teacher instructs students to briefly share outlines in small groups.

Step 2: Teacher divides class in half and hands each half copies of one of the following: downloaded, photocopied pages from the Ransom Center's Gutenberg Bible, Proverbs chapter 1, or downloaded, photocopied pages of the King James Bible, Proverbs chapter 1. Each half should not see what the other half received. Teacher allows approximately 3-5 minutes for students to study their photocopies and generate a list of objective, factual observations of the texts.

Step 3: Students record key observations on the board, and then solicit input from the rest of the class in the creation of a reactionary/interpretive web. The goal is for the class to begin evaluating the aesthetic value of the photocopies. For example, a student may write "left justification" on the board, and a web ramification may result in the associations "left justification" inspires: "orderly, sensible, progressive, conservative."

Step 4: Students reveal their photocopies, and teacher facilitates class discussion about aesthetic factors that influence reader perception and interest in text. Brief attention is paid to social-historical factors influencing popular expectations of the ways books should look, feel, smell, etc. This information is found in **Books Before and After Gutenberg** topic pages: **Early Writing** and **Books Before Gutenberg** found at: <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/education/modules/gutenberg/books>.

Step 5: Teacher presents students with the following typed questions with ample space provided between questions. In groups of four, students are instructed to generate eight more branch questions playing off these questions. Example – below the first question about beautification, perhaps one could draft another question about textual ownership's correlation to income . . .

1. Was beautification of early Renaissance texts simply a matter of income and prestige (more income, more churchly prestige = more beauty)?
2. What effect might early illuminations have had on the reader? Are we talking attempted transubstantiation of text here?
3. Has the impact of illuminations changed through time? Consider the effect illuminations may have on the contemporary Christian. On the contemporary non-Christian?
4. How significantly, if at all, have our needs as readers and our interpretation of books changed since the early Renaissance?

Step 6: All class discussion ensues – students ask questions of one another. Students consider and respond. Teacher facilitates.

Step 7: Individually respond in writing to one question presented in class today.

Modification: Step 7 could be completed at home for homework, or it could be transformed into a paired writing opportunity to be continued the next school day.

Student Product: Extensive notes on factual interpretation of text, reactionary/interpretive web, branch questions, and written response to one question.

Closure: What factors, in order of importance, influence the way *you* respond to text?

Assessment or evaluation: Completion of interpretive web, branch questions, and written response to one question.

Extension: Students participate in the subsequent activities found on the **Gutenberg Education Module**, on creating context, designed by Paula Priour: *Creating Context: The Printing Press as Impetus, Creating Context Mural*.

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