At the 2014 NCTE Annual Convention in Washington, DC, I had the pleasure of attending a panel on the topic of deaf characters in literature, presented by Dynnelle Fields, Kelly Kim, and Casey Spencer. I was so impressed with their panel that I asked them if they would consider sharing their research in this column. They graciously agreed.

Inauthentic Deaf Characters in Traditional Literature

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Deaf characters commonly appear in both canonical and contemporary literature. Some well-loved and often taught novels and short stories include references to them. Frequently, the characters are neither memorable nor likeable, however, and the negatively designed deaf characters often leave readers with inaccurate portrayals of deaf people. Consequently, the deaf students we work with do not feel that these characters represent them well.

Examples of deafness in some literature taught in secondary English classes include the following:

- The Wife of Bath in Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales, an unpleasant woman who becomes deaf in a fight with her husband
- Quasimodo in Hugo’s The Hunchback of Notre Dame, who is a deformed, unattractive deaf man, rejected by society
- Jim’s daughter in Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, whose deafness caused by scarlet fever is discovered by Jim, and causes Jim great distress
- The King and the Duke in the same novel, who cause the narrator to feel disgust when they try to con the Wilkes family by pretending to be brothers, one of whom is deaf, and they use fake sign language to communicate with each other
- Misses Tutti and Frutti in Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, who live in a world of silence while one of them uses a huge ear trumpet to try to hear and the other refuses to admit she is deaf at all, and who have jokes played upon them by local children taking advantage of their inability to hear
- The old man in Hemingway’s “A Clean Well-Lighted Place,” who is a suicidal deaf drunk wanting to close himself off from the world
- Salinger’s Holden Caulfield in The Catcher in the Rye, who dreams of being deaf so that he can further cut himself off from the world and envisions a world of deafness that is not at all like the one our deaf students are familiar with

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Patricia A. Dunn, Column Editor
however. As a result, these characters seem so unlike them and their idea of deafness that they seem irrelevant, serving as pointless symbols in a literary text.

Our students believe that authentic deaf characters should resemble them: capable, communicative, social, and intelligent. Deaf characters in literature rarely embody these traits, however.

To learn about our former students’ reactions to deaf characters in literature, we sent out a request for reactions to some excerpts from texts they had read in the past. A typical reaction came from Dynnelle’s former student, JYM, who, despite having read several texts with deaf characters in class, responded: “I confess I have read very few texts with deaf characters, and I’m not sure I can think of one off the top of my head. Perhaps, you can refresh my memory?” Similarly, SJ sent a video of her ASL response. Its English translation begins: “When Dynnelle contacted me . . . I wondered if I had ever read anything that had deaf characters in it. . . . I felt no connection to them at all.” She explained that the deaf characters had been depicted as strange, stupid, or crazy because of their deafness, while she grew up in a family that was fluent in ASL, attended a school for the deaf, and was a member of the Deaf community. In contrast to the literary characters, her deafness had never been treated as an abnormality or as a disability.

Two students who responded to the excerpts from The Hunchback of Notre Dame, JMM and JL, remarked that they found Quasimodo not only inauthentic but also offensive. JMM noted that the deafness and deformity of Quasimodo emphasizes how, “In the past, society viewed deafness on a par with mental retardation and other unwanted disabilities. People pitied them. . . . The old view is outdated and inaccurate.” Similarly, JL noted that Quasimodo wasn’t recognized for serving his community, but is rather seen as a burden to it. JL commented, “It makes me uncomfortable when people see the deaf as a burden rather than as contributors to society. Is this the message I want to send to the hearing community? Definitely not!” Inauthentic characters such as Quasimodo caused these readers from the Deaf community to feel poorly represented and concerned that readers unfamiliar with their community would get the wrong impression of deafness.

Another student, JP, reacted to the deafness portrayed in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. When JP read the section in which Jim negatively reacts to his discovery of his daughter’s deafness, it evoked the memory of her parents’ discovery that she was deaf. Her parents initially grieved as Twain’s Jim did, but they learned to cope with her deafness by learning sign language to communicate with her. As JP remarked, “My parents learned that being deaf is not a bad thing—it is identifying with a culture—which is a good thing, not a negative thing. It is not something to pity.” The portrayal in the novel, however, gives the impression that deafness is nothing more than a tragedy.

CL also reacted to Twain’s novel. When the con artists, the Duke and King, pretend to be a deaf man and his brother by using hand gestures that do not resemble real sign language, CL says that it shows how in the past, “ASL was looked down on and seen as animal-like or low class.” While CL feels offended by this, he is also pleased by Twain’s use of Huck to express dismay at the con artists’ behavior. CL points out that Twain was ahead of his time in acknowledging a difference between unintelligible signs and actual sign language, adding, “Twain was clearly against [a negative] perspective of deaf people. . . . I thought it was really cool and rare to see criticism of that kind of behavior against deaf people in that time.”

Pairing Texts to Counter Misrepresented Deaf Characters in Classic Texts

Since we cannot (and should not) abandon classic texts with misrepresented deaf characters, we must consider how to address them more appropriately. We suggest taking a 21st-century approach framed by an understanding of the effects of inauthentic texts. To us this means pairing these classic, inauthentic texts with texts that contain authentic deaf individuals. Our preference is to find pairings (see Figure 1) from the same time period as the traditional text so the two texts can be viewed through lenses shaped by time and perspective. We have chosen a mix of fiction, nonfiction, poetic, and artistic materials that students can use to provide context and contrast.
One example of this pairing is to compare the behavior of the Duke and King in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with a similar modern situation by reading this section of the novel alongside deaf poet Donna Williams’s “We Never Meant Any Disrespect.” This poem is a reaction to the fake sign language at the funeral of Nelson Mandela in December 2013. Williams writes, “OK, so the interpreter was a fake, / But you have to admit it’s pretty funny, right? / Hilarious.” The poem then goes on to remind us that the funeral was meant to be all-inclusive to honor a man who fought exclusion, but that the fake interpreter turned the event into a farce. The poem demonstrates the absurdity and the belittling of a language and culture that follows. The poet’s reaction to the situation continues for many stanzas and provides an excellent resource for comparing Twain’s situation with a recent event.

For characters to juxtapose with Miss Tutti and Frutti in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we look to “Miss Hester of Sunset Valley” by Guie Leo Deliglio. In this piece, Miss Hester says, “I have kept a boarding house in the city for ten years. I sold it only last month to a friend of mine, and am out here to open a new one on a smaller scale just to show that it is much pleasanter for us deaf to board together than living apart in town.” Unlike Lee’s sisters, Miss Hester, a full member of both the Deaf and hearing communities, wants to support and be around others who are Deaf; she is competent, admired, and well-respected by all.

Researcher and Gallaudet University professor Sharon Pajka-West has found that portrayals of deaf characters in literature have become more realistic and positively received by deaf readers in the last decade. She credits this change to more writers researching the Deaf community and/or having connections to it. As teachers, we need to take advantage of these texts and ensure that the characters we present to our students are authentic. If they are not, we need to show them what the authentic version of such a character looks like and to discuss the differences. We hope that by using our paired readings, teachers will be able to present more authentic illustrations of deafness, portrayals that both hearing and deaf students can understand and relate to.

**Works Cited**


Disabling Assumptions


Dynnelle Fields (hearing), Kelly Kim (deaf), and Casey Spencer (hearing) are English teachers in the Secondary Department at The Learning Center for the Deaf in Framingham, Massachusetts. They have worked together to address the negative messages about deafness that traditional literature often imparts to their students and to all readers of these works.

PARCC Test Prep

The teacher tapes black paper over words in her classroom. Auschwitz blacked out with Shakespeare, Whitman, Hughes, and Twain.
Classroom guidelines covered up, Emily Dickinson’s mouth sealed. Test week, and nothing can appear that might help the children.
No words. She, who had allowed students to play with words like dolls, dressing and undressing them, revealing in them secrets, symbols, layers of meaning, must now make words disappear. Pictures, too, which might prompt writing ideas. She peels from the walls Anne Frank, an African mask, Ziggy.
Surely the room is test-ready now. 
But won’t pines and grass and birds and clouds spark ideas too? So she measures black paper over the windows. Fluorescent bulbs provide the only source of color now.
Shut off, she cannot see desks, the door, her hands before her face, like a spelunker without a flashlight, a child without words.

—Joe Countryman
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