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Creating Art in the English Classroom

by Annie Yon

I sat at Starbucks one afternoon glaring at the remaining stack of 70 essays on *To Kill a Mockingbird* I needed to grade. For their final assessment, students were asked to write a literary analysis essay that asked them to compare and contrast the narrative style, message, and tone in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird." After reading five essays, I was already yawning, frustrated by the number of sterile, formulaic essays I received; most lacked originality, voice, and for the most part, each student's thesis argued the same claim we discussed in class. Looking at all the red C's I had stamped on my students' paper, I began to think about the relevance of this essay as a final assessment of my students' understanding of the text. It was evident that my students absolutely detested the writing prompt, a genre I felt compelled to teach in order to prepare my students for the newly-adopted PARCC exam. I wanted to give my students an opportunity to empathize with the characters and further invest themselves in the story. So the next day, students were asked to create a spoken word, skit, or a performance that thematically connected to the text. Ultimately, while the essay was a failure due to a paucity of original ideas, their creative assignment was a beautifully crafted success that reflected the reader's individual, aesthetic experience of the text.

When introducing his project, my 11th-grade student, Edward, expressed his outrage at the racist, all-white jury and judge for condemning the fictional Tom Robinson, an African American, and the Scottsboro Boys to prison for crimes they did not commit. Edward stood in front of his 15 classmates and performed his spoken word poem on a theme from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He introduced the title of the poem, "The Beautiful Moth," and began:

If you were born a moth, would you want to be a butterfly?

See, a moth and a butterfly are very similar creatures
They crawl, they walk, and have almost the same features
But why does the butterfly make fun of the moth's color?
The moth has never been so hurt; he thought the butterfly was his brother
He is constantly harassed but holds his head up high
He has a constant urge to hide and a constant urge to cry
A constant urge to believe, but a constant urge to die
See, the moth is not ugly
His beauty is his ability to stand strong
And his good and gracious heart
His willingness to help others and eagerness to take part
And the butterfly is not really that beautiful
He is ugly because of his evil thoughts
His malice against his brothers, his malice against the moths
So who is really a moth?
And who is really a butterfly?
A butterfly is not just the person with a beautiful smile
But a moth is the one that wants to help others and go the extra mile
The moth really wants to know why he is discriminated against
So he asks, why?
And the butterfly tells him that, that's just the nature
Why do you do me that way?
Why am I betrayed by my fellow fly?
And I ask you again
If you were born a moth, would you want to be a butterfly?

First, Edward's animated hand gestures, intonation, and decision to perform it to the class reveal his interest and dedication to the assignment. Next, Edward's choice to use the metaphor of a moth and a butterfly to discuss the wrongs of discrimination shows that he was, in fact, influenced by Angelou's "Caged Bird." In addition, the rhetorical questions through the repetition of "why" further emphasize his perspective that racism is unjustifiable and develop the theme of brotherhood. In this poem, he makes the argument that the moth is not ugly, stands strong, and is willing to help those around it; it is hopeful with "a constant urge to believe," but also affected by prejudice that it has a "constant urge to die." On the other hand, the butterfly is not beautiful because of his "evil thoughts" and "malice." He concludes his poem with a rhetorical question making his audience reconsider the definition of beauty. Furthermore, Edward empathizes with the one being discriminated against, which is shown when he slips the word "me" in the line "Why do you do *me* that way?" Edward begins writing in the second-person point of view to lure his readers in, shifts to third-person to discuss the symbolism of the moth and butterfly, then ends in a first-person point of view. When Edward substitutes the "moth" with "me," he becomes part of the narrative and experiences the hurt and anger of the victim. Ultimately, Edward's creation of his poem reflects his thinking and interest in the text in an original way—much better than a literary paper can assess.

Is a Literary Essay the Best Assessment for Reading?

Forced with demands to prepare students for standardized tests such as the SATs and PARCC, English teachers seem to be straying from creative assessments to multiple choice exams and analytical essays. In a Ted Talk on "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" Ken Robinson argues, "If you were to visit education, as an alien, and say, 'What's it for, public education?' I think you'd have to conclude, if you look at the output, who really succeeds by this, who gets all the brownie points, who are the winners—You'd have to conclude the whole purpose of public education is to produce university professors." Robinson posits that individuality is no longer valued in schools, especially since these state tests, teacher-assigned exams and essays strip away students' creativity. Similarly, Peter Elbow articulates, "The development of writing as a technology seems to have led to the development of careful and logical thinking—to a greater concern with 'trying to get it *really right*'" (284). In other words, Robinson and Elbow suggest that the "winners" are students who follow all directions ("to get it really right") and complete assigned work, even if they do not pleasure in any of the activities. Hence, in an English class, writing becomes a means to impress the teacher and score high on the rubric. Consequently, when writing a literary analysis essay on a core text in the curriculum, the student regurgitates trite responses from class discussion to ensure that their interpretation is "correct," and inundates their paper with transitional phrases and embellished vocabulary terms to be seen as an "academic." Educational practices that restrict student freedom and imagination seemingly prevent teachers from creating avid readers and writers. Of course, no English teacher intentionally tries to elicit tepid papers in response to literature from students.

However, I now recognize how an English teacher's seemingly innocuous instruction—asking students to read independently and write analytic responses on the text develops theme, assigning argumentative essays ("and don't forget the thesis!"), mandating outlines with topic and concluding sentences, and grading student writing by marking up all grammatical blunders—can destroy a student's incentive to read and write. If our purpose as English teachers is to help students aesthetically experience the text and produce life-long writers and readers as opposed "university professors," we should limit the number of assigned analytic essays, which generally asks them to prove the author's message or story's theme, and offer abundant opportunities that allow for students to become imaginative, reflective, and inventive again.

Creative Projects in our Independent Reading Unit

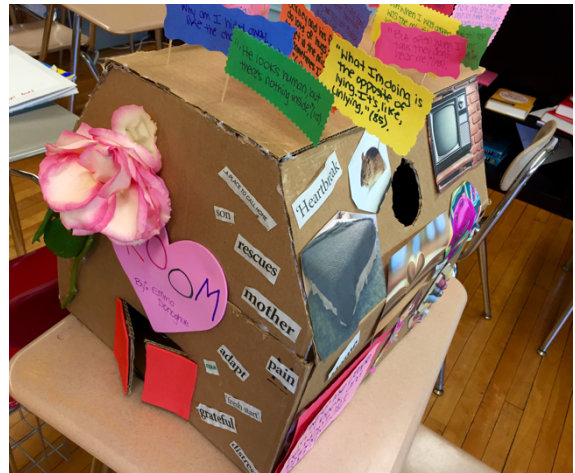
By the time that my 10th and 11th grade students began our independent reading unit, I was inspired mainly by Elbow's teaching philosophy. I was most struck by his wish that "the culture of literature

learn more inherent attention and concern for students—their lives and what’s on their minds. [If it did,] teachers of literature would give more attention to helping students read with involvement and write more imaginative pieces” (540). Instead of assigning the traditional book report that asks for students to analyze the setting, plot, and theme, my students created imaginative, artistic projects for their final assessment. First, students had to create a four-stanza poem that follows a rhyme scheme and is thematically related to the literature they read. Second, students had to create a visual representation of their book through the means of a scrapbook, a game board, a poster, or any other creative project that appealed to them.

With students reading books of different genres (e.g. Mystery, Fantasy, Romance, and Nonfiction), the projects and poems presented in class were original and eclectic. Prior to their presentation, students read daily in and out of class for three weeks. They had the freedom to select their own books (on their reading level and with some professional guidance) in order for them to have a personalized and meaningful experience with the text. Although they silently read for most of the class period, students consistently participated in group discussions on their book, completed double-entry journals by reacting to passages that resonated with them, and wrote diary entries from the perspective of a character (expressive writing). Expressive writing prompts that allow for students to *become* the character in the story and projects that ask them to visually represent their book augmented their engagement with the text as well as the quality of the class discussion.

Projects and Poems: The Three-Dimensional Collage

My 11th-grade student, Angie Johnson, read Emma Donoghue’s *Room*, a story told from the perspective of five-year-old Jack, who is born and lives in an 11-by-11-foot room after a man named “Old Nick” kidnaps and rapes Ma, Jack’s mother. For her project on *Room*, Angie created a three-dimensional replication of the story’s setting and covered the exterior of “the room” with a collage of quotes from the story she analyzed, words she cut out from newspapers that describe the mother’s state of mind (“adapt,” “pain,” “heartbreak,” “distress,” “grateful”), and symbols (television, mouse, book, rug) that she found significant. While presenting her project, Angie explained, “One of the quotes that stood out to me was when Ma tells Dr. Clay that Jack has ‘never been out of my sight and nothing happened to him, nothing like what you’re insinuating’ (167). Dr. Clay wants to examine Jack to check for any abuse, but Ma refuses because she knows that Jack has never left her sight. This reveals how no one quite understands what Ma and Jack went through while being locked up. She is offended that the doctor would even imply that Ma abused her child.” In her response, Angie first cites a line from the text, then provides context to help her peers understand the relevance of the line; she concludes by inferring why Ma is agitated by the doctor’s insinuation.



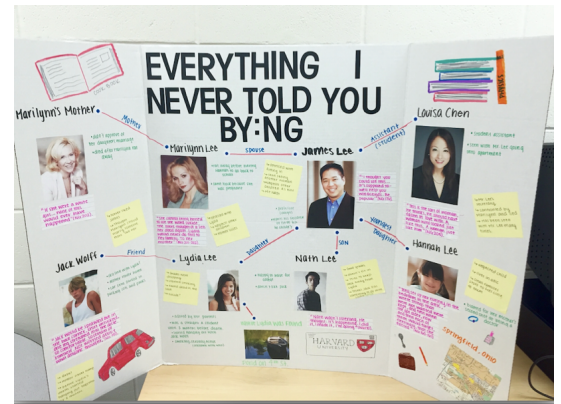
What I admired about assigning these projects was that students analyzed quotes from the story that they individually related to and offered their own original analysis without regurgitating ideas shared in class discussions. The project was also successful in getting students to ask questions and think about what they were curious or confused about, an important skill in the reading process. Angie continued, “For those of you who read or watched the movie, I have a question. What do you think is going to happen to Jack if he is so behind in development? Are the newspapers correct in saying that he has a form of mental retardation?” Her questions invited students to become invested in Angie’s presentation and her reading experience; students, who watched the movie or read the book, shared their opinions, but even students, who were unfamiliar with the story, contributed by thinking

about real cases of abducted children that are rescued and expected to live normally again.

When asked if Angie gained any new insights from creating her project, she remarked, “It made me think about how similar this case is with that of a child named Genie², who was trapped in a room for the first thirteen years of her life with no way out. When Genie was found, she was extremely behind, which hindered her entrance into society. One parallel I see between Jack and Genie is their inadequate language capabilities and assumptions of mental retardation.” The connection she makes between Jack and Ma’s case and that of the feral child Genie reveals her understanding that a fictional story is also a reflection of situations that occur in our society. Instead of merely reciting facts from the novel, Angie makes intertextual connections between stories, categorizes quotes and symbols to show how they develop the theme, and analyzes character motive as well. Most importantly, her engagement with the text is evident.

Family Board and Perspective Writing

My student Taylor Gram, a sophomore, read Celeste Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You*, a story about a Chinese American family living in 1970s small-town Ohio who is horrified by the death of their missing daughter, Lydia Lee. Taylor made her own version of a crime board; however, instead of an evidence board of suspects that a detective might keep, she structured the board to resemble a family tree to show how each character connects to one another. She explained that the family secrets, pressures, and lies are what compel Lydia to run away from her family. First, Taylor’s project is extremely detailed; similar to the content seen in Angie’s project, Taylor also includes quotes and symbols (e.g. Harvard bumper sticker, items that Hannah steals, the car that symbolizes Lydia’s alternative life) from the story as well as descriptions and an analysis of each character’s relevance to Lydia’s death. Taylor expressed her frustration toward James Lee, the father, who has an affair with his graduate assistant, Louisa Chen, and is obsessed with trying to fit in as a Chinese American; her annoyance at Marilyn Lee, the overbearing mother, who neglects the other children but is consumed by the idea of prepping Lydia to apply to Harvard University; and empathy toward Lydia, who rebels against her oppressing mother and father.



Taylor explained that she sympathizes with Lydia, but she found herself caring more about the minor character, Hannah Lee, Lydia’s younger sister. In her presentation, Taylor remarked, “The parents are so obsessed with Lydia’s academic performance that they hover over her and neglect Hannah. The narrator says, ‘They set up Hannah’s nursery in the bedroom in the attic, where things were not wanted were kept, and even when she got older, now and then each of them would forget, fleetingly, that she existed’ (160-161). Ugh! It got me so mad, but this makes me wonder if Hannah will also follow Lydia’s footsteps later on and rebel against her parents. Maybe she’ll also lead a double-life and party like Lydia did behind her parents’ back. But would the parents even care if Lydia ran away?” First, I was fascinated by the way Taylor fervidly revealed her antipathy toward the parents who “emotionally abandoned” Hannah in the attic, but more so by the stream of consciousness in her presentation. In talking out her thoughts, Taylor seemed to make predictions and generate more

² “Genie,” the pseudonym for a feral child born in 1957, was abused and locked in one of the family’s bedrooms for nearly 11 years by her sadistic father. This solitary confinement and social isolation caused a delay in her speech and communication skills, which was widely analyzed and recorded in the works of psychologists and linguists.

ideas about what could've happened if there was a sequel to the book. Her interest in the book is further emphasized in the narrative she wrote to pair with her project. From the perspective of Hannah Lee, Taylor expressed:

My name is Hannah and I am seven years old. My sister was found in the pond by the lake two weeks ago. I don't think my family is normal, but I wouldn't know since I don't have many friends, and I don't have playdates. My mommy and daddy wouldn't even know if I was gone. I'm not really sure what to feel about the fact that Lydia is gone. In the summer, she would never go into the water since she couldn't swim, and if I asked her she would just yell at me and tell me to go away. I never understood why she hated me so much, and I don't think I miss her although I was shocked that they found her bloated body floating face-down in the river. She never once talked to me except when she wanted something or when I was touching her stuff. I sometimes take things that my family won't notice because they will at least acknowledge me even though they'd yell. Like ever since I can remember, my mother only makes tea for herself, so I took the tiniest spoon in her tea set. I stole my father's old wallet, which is as thin as paper now. I took Nath's pencil with his teeth markings on it. These things make me feel happy and like I'm part of the family. The only time I have felt the slightest comfort was when my parents fought in the vacant room, which used to be Lydia's. My brother Nath would hold me and I rested my head in his shoulders and smelled his cologne. He was my first hug (Jordan).

In this excerpt of her narrative, Taylor immerses herself into Hannah's character and sympathizes with her. She cites textual evidence to support her argument that Hannah feels neglected but apathetic toward Lydia's death. For example, Hannah is affected by the mom who makes tea only for herself and questions why her family members "hate her so much." In addition, Taylor suggests that even though Hannah sees Lydia's dead body floating in the river, she does not miss her. Taylor further mentions that Lydia steals her family member's items to feel closer to them and infers that the parents aren't the most loving or caring, possibly the reason for Lydia's suicide. After her reflection of the book, Taylor concluded her presentation by asking her classmates, "This book made me question: How does parental pressure affect children? How do secrets tear a family apart? Similar to the parents who took Lydia for granted, what do we take for granted in this world?" She led a fruitful, engaging discussion with students asking questions about her book and sharing stories of familial secrets and pressures they feel as teenagers and sons/daughters.

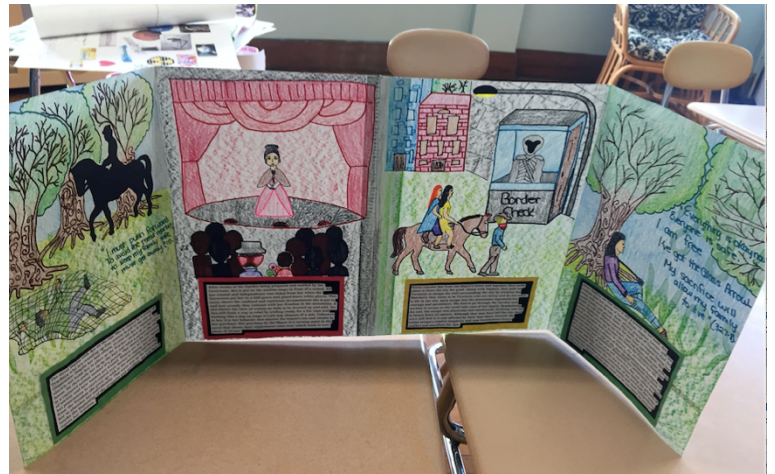
As previously mentioned, giving students the freedom to create projects and write narratives is equally or even more valuable than assigning a specific literary essay. While a book report might ask students to take a cursory look at a story to write a summary or a subjective review of the book, projects ask students to think deeply about their reading experience and share ideas and insights that are individualized to the reader. In addition, while a literary essay asks students to prove an argument, the narrative that Taylor wrote from the perspective of Hannah and her presentation of her family board revealed her understanding and higher-level thinking about the book. In fact, the common-core standards were also addressed through this assignment; Taylor used narrative techniques, such as description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences of the character (ELA. W.9-10.3); she propelled conversations by posing questions that relate to broader themes or larger ideas of her book (ELA. SL. 9-10.1); she cited strong and thorough textual evidence to support her analysis (ELA. RL. 9-10.1); and finally, she analyzed how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme (ELA. RL. 9-10.3). To sum up, the creative project allowed for Taylor to imaginatively create a work of art that she was invested in and not just because it was a mandatory assignment.

Panorama and Poem

The last student to present her project, Charlotte Greff held up her poster, a panorama of scenes

from Kristen Simmon's *The Glass Arrow*, and introduced, "The story begins with Aya running through the forest to escape a group of trackers, whose aim is to capture any women they find to sell them to the government. Women are thought to be evil in this dystopian society because men are afraid of their own weakness of succumbing to temptations. The caught women are essentially auctioned off to the highest bidder." Charlotte led a discussion on gender inequality and expectations. She connected the *The Glass Arrow* to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* claiming that both stories take place in a society where women are owned by men, stripped of their rights, and expected to procreate.

I was impressed by the way Charlotte synthesized the readings; instead of compartmentalizing each story into different categories, she actively sought similarities and differences that helped her understand the consequences of a constricting, patriarchal society on women. In her presentation of her project, she discussed how the themes of individuality, sacrifice, freedom, and trust develop in the story and mentioned a quote that she found most memorable: "I remember how Mother told me that this was just the way of things. That to have life there must be death, To have joy, there must be sadness. And that I must not be angry even though I'm angry. I'm *still* angry" (Simmons 95). She explained that Aya needed to make sacrifices as well as understand her mother's advice that to be safe meant to sacrifice one's freedom, because freedom also means that one is in danger. Inspired by Aya, an anomaly in the patriarchal society, Charlotte wrote a poem titled "She Wanted Freedom" and recited it to the class:



Life ran with equality on the rise
As men and women were treated the same.
But they warped society with lies
Of witchcraft, saying women were to blame.

Women became collectables for sale.
Men became their owners and superiors.
Women bear sons because her roles so entail,
Men naught but treat her as inferior.

She did not want to be controlled forever.
She did not want a meaningless life story.
She did not want that life now or ever.
She did not want life in purgatory.

She wanted that freedom for her and them,
So she was relentless and persistent.
Thus she fought to avoid being condemned.
Til death, she refused to be ignorant.

The poem is done well and reflects Charlotte's comprehension of the text. The first stanza sets up the context of the story and introduces how women were seen as inferior; she explained that the line

“They warped society with lies of witchcraft, saying women were were to blame” was inspired by Miller’s *The Crucible*. Similar to the townspeople in Salem, Massachusetts, who accuse women of being witches through the preposterous claim that they bonded with the devil and were more susceptible to sin, the men in *The Glass Arrow* also make women scapegoats. The second stanza addresses gender roles; the metaphor of women as “collectibles for sale” reveals Charlotte’s understanding that women were objectified with the sole purpose of bearing “sons because her roles entail.” Through the use of anaphora in the third stanza, Charlotte discusses Aya’s state of mind; Aya does not want to live a “meaningless life” or feel trapped in “purgatory.” She is not like the other women in the story who blindly adhere to societal traditions. Finally, the last stanza reveals Aya’s obstinacy and ambition to fight for her freedom and escape the Trackers. Higher order thinking was evident in Charlotte’s panorama project and poem. She recalled plot events and basic concepts from her story to summarize the *The Glass Arrow* for her peers; she demonstrated understanding of themes and ideas by depicting and organizing important scenes from the story; she made intertextual connections among *The Glass Arrow*, *The Crucible*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*; and she analyzed quotes and Aya’s motives to teach the class about the dangers of conformity. The project and poem assessment as well as the presentation helped students like Charlotte reflect on their reading process in an imaginative and effective manner.

My New Teaching Philosophy

Inspired by Elbow’s argument that no activity works better than inviting students to write stories or poems that are structurally or thematically related to the literature and Maxine Greene’s discussion of the importance of aesthetic encounters, I created lessons designed around imaginative thinking. My instructional activities allowed for students to notice deeply, pose questions, make connections, embody and empathize, create meaning, and reflect on their work. This year, my students created their own art works (poems, narratives, drawings), learned reading strategies that help “promote metacognitive awareness and heightens students’ emotional and cognitive engagement” (Appleman 33), and wrote papers that required the synthesizing of readings through intertextual connections. Out of all the activities that students participated in, I recognized that opportunities for students to release their imagination, experience empathy, and meaningfully collaborate with their peers were most successful in getting students engaged in their reading.

Unfortunately, many teachers do not see the value in assigning creative projects or narrative prompts (expressive writing) because these activities supposedly do not prepare students “to critically think,” “write analytically,” and “for college.” My argument is not to discredit teachers who assign mandatory essay topics (to prepare students for standardized tests) or those who only use short answers and multiple choice exams to assess students after each unit, because I do agree that part of an English teacher’s responsibility is to prepare students to write literary analysis papers and to offer them some practice in taking multiple choice tests. However, I believe that both students and teachers can benefit from *limiting* the number of assigned topics for essays for more creative assessments in which students can showcase their individual experiences with the text. Our job as teachers is to help students construct their own meaning from stories and not become “miners of existing meanings” (Hogue Smith). Essays that ask for students to prove a theme or the author’s intent perpetuate the problem of students continuously look for the “correct” interpretation of a text.

As Peter Smagorinsky articulates in *Teaching English by Design*, “Argumentation and analysis are skills that I would expect someone to learn in school; they are not the only forms of expression students should acquire in English class” (13). In addition to analytic essays, I found that double-entry journals in which students have the choice to react to individual passages; narrative prompts that allow them to embody the character; poems that rhetorically or thematically relate to the story; and creative projects that ask for students to animate the text work best in my classroom; these activities influence students to see reading and education as meaningful and pleasurable. Moreover, these

creative assignments have motivated me to spend less time begrudgingly reading C essays in the Starbucks and more time being like the moth Edward described, who motivated others to “go the extra mile.”

Appendix
Additional Student Projects

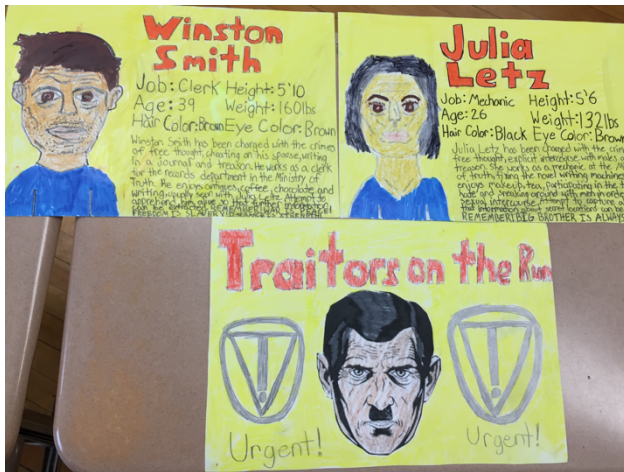


Figure 1 Thomas* created a Wanted Poster for Winston and Julia, characters that rebel against Big Brother, in Orwell’s 1984.



Figure 2 Sam* created a game board on her book *City of Lost Souls*. She includes “Rune cards” and “Demon cards” that explain what each player needs to do. The game instructions and cards describe an event from her book.



Figure 3 Ella* created her take on a collage after reading *Intern: A Doctor's Initiation*. She typed up a report from the perspective of a psychoanalyst who diagnoses the main character in the book.

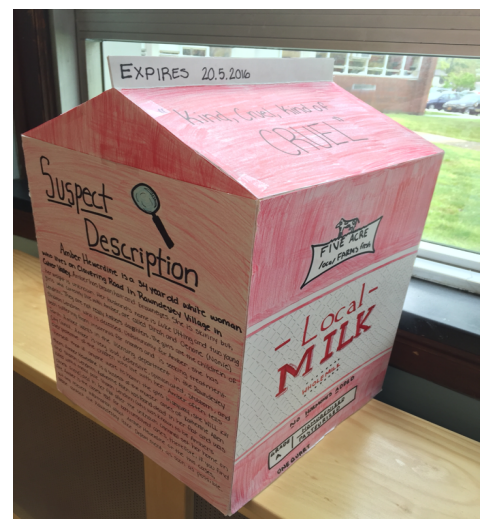


Figure 4 Jenn* created a three-dimensional milk box with a picture of a suspect and an analysis of the character’s motives and traits after reading Sophia Hannah’s *A Kind of Cruel*.

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